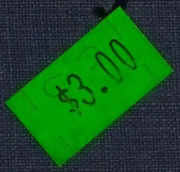
FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS AT BROOKSIDE FARM

Mabel C. Hawley



"Come on," said Bobby, "we have to capture the ducks."
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FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS AT BROOKSIDE FARM

BY

MABEL C. HAWLEY

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Four Little Blossoms at Brookside Farm

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FOUR LITTLE BLOSSOMS AT BROOKSIDE FARM

CHAPTER I

THE RESCUE OF PHILIP

"MEG!"

The little girl curled up in the window-seat did not move.

"Meg, you know Mother said we were to go before four o'clock, and it's half-past three now. You'll wait till the twins come in, and then they'll want to go, too." Bobby Blossom looked anxiously at his sister.

Meg put down her book and untangled her feet from the window cushions.

"I'm coming," she promised. "I never do get a chapter all read, Bobby. Where's my hat? I see it. I'll get it!"

Meg's hat was on the lawn outside where she had dropped it, and now she raised the screen and tumbled through the window to the ground.

It wasn't far to tumble, and Meg had done it so often she was sure of landing safely.

"Norah says no lady goes out of the house through a window," giggled Bobby, tumbling after Meg and closing the screen carefully. Bobby was always careful to leave everything as he found it.

Meg giggled, too.

"I don't care, long as I grow up to be a lady like Mother," she asserted. "Let's hurry, Bobby, and perhaps we can stop at the library."

The children had reached the two stone posts at the foot of the lawn when a loud shriek halted them.

"Meg Blossom, you said I could go! Wait for me!"

Down the slightly sloping lawn hurried a short, thick-set little girl with dark eyes and hair and the reddest cheeks you ever saw. She carried a doll whose blue eyes opened and shut snappily with every jump her small mother took. This was Dot, Meg's little sister.

"You said I could go," panted Dot, when she caught up with Meg and Bobby. "Wait for

Twaddles, he's coming. He wants to take the kiddie car."

"I told you so," scolded Bobby. "I never went uptown in my life all you children didn't want to tag along. You've got grease on your dress, Dot."

"Sam was cleaning the car," said Dot serenely. "I guess I brushed against the grease can. It won't show when I'm sitting down. There's Twaddles."

Bumping its way over the green grass came a kiddie car with a small boy astride it.

"I'm all ready," he beamed. "Come on, Bobby."

"You can't take that kiddie car," announced Bobby firmly. "Mother said this letter was to go in the four o'clock mail and we've got to hurry. If you and Dot want to go. vou'll have to walk fast."

Twaddles usually minded Bobby. He promptly surrendered the kiddie car and continued to smile pleasantly.

The four Blossoms trudged briskly along. If you had ever lived in Oak Hill you would have

known them. The whole town knew Meg and Bobby and Dot and Twaddles, and the children knew nearly every one, having lived in that one place all their short lives.

Bobby was the oldest. He was seven, and was remarkably like his sister Meg in looks. Both had fair hair and blue eyes. Meg's real name was Margaret Alice Blossom, and she was named for her mother. Bobby's full name was Robert Hayward Blossom. He was just a year older than Meg.

The twins were the funniest and dearest little couple, four years old and as roly-poly, happy-go-lucky a pair of youngsters as ever tumbled into one scrape after another and out again. They were known as Dot and Twaddles to all their friends, but, of course, they had "real" names like other children. Dot was named for an aunt, Dorothy Anna Blossom, and Twaddles was Arthur Gifford Blossom, if you please. Only no one ever called him that.

The Blossom children lived at the very tip end of the long straggling street that divided Oak Hill into two sections; in fact the Blossoms'

rambling, comfortable old house was almost outside the town limits. Father Blossom owned the big foundry on the other side of the railroad.

"I'll go in," said Bobby, when they reached the post-office. "You wait here."

He disappeared into the yellow wooden building that was the Oak Hill post-office, and the other Blossoms, seeing a stalled car, stopped to watch the troubles of the interurban motorman whose trolley-car was blocked by a dog that apparently wanted to be run over.

The motorman clanged his bell and a boy on the curbstone whistled shrilly, but the dog refused to budge. He only rolled over on his side.

"He's hurt," said Meg. "See, his foot drags. I'll get him off."

She dashed out into the street and bent over the poor animal. Meg was "just crazy," her brothers said, about animals, and she was never afraid of any four-footed creature. Now, as she leaned over the little dog, he began to lick her hand with his rough tongue.

"His leg's broken," Meg said pityingly to the

conductor and the motorman who had joined her. "Oh, the poor doggie! But Doctor Maynard will fix it."

There was a crowd now gathered on the car tracks, and Bobby, who had come out of the post-office and heard from the twins what was going on, pushed his way through to his sister.

"You hold your dress," he directed. "I'll lift him. There!"

The little dog was a heavy armful for Meg, but she held him bravely.

"I'm afraid of strange dogs myself," declared the conductor, plainly relieved that some one else had tended to the dog. "What are you going to do with him, little girl?"

"Take him to the doctor's," announced Meg. "Aren't we, Bobby?"

"Of course," affirmed Bobby.

He and Meg, carrying the dog, went back to where Twaddles and Dot were waiting. The twins were used to waiting patiently while the older children investigated sudden alarms and excitements.

"Let me pat him," begged Dot. "He's pretty,

isn't he? Is he hurt, Meg? What are you going to do with him?"

"Take him to Doctor Maynard's," said Meg briefly. "I guess he's in, 'cause it's after four o'clock."

Kind, jolly Doctor Maynard was in. He was the Blossoms' family doctor, and knew the children very well. He didn't seem a bit surprised to have the four of them walk into his consulting room.

"Now, who's sick?" he demanded, pretending to be anxious. "Don't tell me Dot needs gingerbread pills? Or has Twaddles been eating too much layer cake? Dear, dear, you can't all have the whooping cough!"

Meg smiled, a little watery smile. Tears stood in her blue eyes.

"It's this," she said, spreading out her dress on the couch so that the doctor could see the dog. "I think his leg is broken."

Doctor Maynard sat down on the couch and the children crowded around him. The brown eyes of the dog watched him intently as though he knew that help was at hand.

"Yes, it's broken," said the doctor gently, after feeling of the slim little hind leg that dragged so uselessly. "But we can mend it, Meg. I have splints right here."

While the others watched, Doctor Maynard tore off long white strips of cloth and selected two wooden splints. These he placed one on each side of the broken leg and then directed Meg to wind the strips firmly around while he held the splints in place. This was to make the leg grow strong and straight again.

"Doesn't it hurt?" demanded Twaddles curiously.

"Yes, it hurts him," admitted Doctor Maynard, stroking the head of the little dog. "But animals are splendid patients, and they seldom complain. Now, then, our little friend is about as good as new, except that he will have to go on three legs for a bit."

The telephone rang just then and it proved to be a call for the doctor.

"I'll have to run along, chicks," he said hurriedly. "Going to keep the dog, Meg?"

"If Mother doesn't care," answered Meg.

"Mother won't care," said Bobby, as the children were walking home. He was very fond of his sister and tried to help her get whatever she wanted. "Sam will let him sleep in the garage and perhaps he will be a ratter. Sam likes a dog that is a ratter." Sam Layton was the man of all work employed by Mr. Blossom.

Meg and Bobby took turns carrying the dog home, and Twaddles mourned the fact that the kiddie car had not been brought along.

"I could have given him a ride," he explained. "What makes his tongue hang out like that, Meg?"

"He's hot," said Meg. "And I think he wants a drink. Let's take him around to the kitchen and give him some water."

As they neared the kitchen door some one spoke to them through the screen.

"Meg! Meg! What's this you do be bringing home with ye? A dog? Most likely it has the mange now, or some disease ye will all be catching. Why can't ye ever take up with a nice, quiet cat? 'Tis no dog I'll be having in me clean kitchen, mind that!"

Meg put the strange dog down on the gravel path. He swayed unsteadily on three legs.

"Look, Norah," she said. "His leg is broken. Doctor Maynard set it. And we only want to get him a drink of water. He's thirsty. He needn't even come into the house."

Norah had a sharp tongue, but her heart was generous and sweet.

"The poor beastie!" she said, opening the screen door of her jealously guarded kitchen. "Bring him in, Meg. He do be having fever, I suspect. I'll get him a cup of water. Dear, dear!"

Making a soft, sympathetic, clucking noise, Norah hurried to get a cup of cool water which the little dog lapped up greedily, standing on his three good legs.

"Bobby said he thought Sam would let him sleep in the garage," said Meg. "I suppose it is cooler there for him. All right, Norah, I'll carry him out. But we want to show him to Mother."

"She went to meet your father—she and Sam with the car," Norah told them. "And if I don't

get my biscuits in, they'll be back before there's a thing cooked to eat."

The children took the hint and hurried to the garage. Bobby and Twaddles spread an old mat for the dog in a cool, dark corner, and very glad he seemed to be to have a place to lie down.

"We'll bring you some supper," Meg promised, patting him kindly. "You take a nap and forget 'bout your troubles."

"There's the car round front!" shouted Twaddles. "Bet you I see Daddy first."

"Bet you don't!" shrieked Dot.

With wild whoops the children tore round to the front of the house and fell upon Father and Mother Blossom just getting out of the car.

"We brought a dog home," cried Bobby.

"Come out and see him," urged Meg, clinging to her Mother's hand. "He's a dear little dog, and I love him already."

CHAPTER II

AN INVITATION

THE Blossoms all went back to the garage and found Sam bending over the sick dog.

"He's a cute little fellow, Mr. Blossom," said Sam. "Just a pup, too. Shouldn't wonder if he turned out to be a good ratter when his leg gets well."

That was the highest praise Sam could give a dog, and Meg and Bobby were delighted.

"May we keep him, Mother?" they urged. "He can live in the garage. Please, Mother."

Mother Blossom looked at Father.

"Well, Ralph?" she said.

"Why, keep him, of course," counseled Father Blossom, laughter-twinkles in his kind eyes. "Norah is the sole objector in the family, and if you can pacify her there's no reason why we shouldn't have as many dogs as we want. Named him yet, Meg?"

"I want to think about a name for him," replied Meg. "You can't change names, you know,

and I wouldn't want him to have a silly name."

"That's my cautious daughter," said Father Blossom. "And now it seems to me that some one said we were going to have supper early to-night."

"We are," declared Mother Blossom. "Children, you have several things to do before you are ready for the table. Your faces and hands are a sight. Bobby, didn't you go to the post-office? Was there any mail?"

"I forgot, Mother—there was one letter for you," answered Bobby, pulling a crumpled envelope from his pocket. "The dog kind of took my attention," he added.

Mother Blossom went into the house to read her letter, and the four children scampered upstairs to wash their faces and hands. Meg and Dot shared the same room, and Bobby and Twaddles slept in the room adjoining. Each child had a little white bed and a separate bureau.

"I s'pose I'd better put on another dress," said Dot doubtfully. "Mother didn't say to, though. Shall I, Meg?"

"Well, I would," advised Meg. "Not a spandy clean one, 'cause you mussed up two yesterday. Put on the green one again, can't you?"

"I tore that," objected Dot, who certainly had bad luck with her clothes. "Oh, dear, I don't see why I wasn't a bird with a dress all glued on."

"'Most ready?" asked Mother Blossom, who had come upstairs while the little girls were talking. "Let Mother tie your ribbon, Meg. What's the matter with Dot?"

Meg bubbled into a gay little laugh.

"She was wishing she was a bird with a dress glued on," she said. "Wouldn't that be funny?"

"Yes, it would," agreed Mother Blossom. "But bring me the white piqué, dear, and let me help you into it. Daddy is waiting for us."

Dot was buttoned into a clean dress in a minute, and then Mother Blossom had to call Twaddles away from the basin in the bathroom where he was playing in the water instead of washing his hands, and she had to find a clean handkerchief for Bobby, and then, at last, they could all go downstairs.

Father Blossom was playing the mechanical piano, but he stopped as soon as he saw them.

"Everybody here to-night?" he asked. "Well, that is fine! Come on, Dottie-mine, and Daddy will tie your bib for you."

The twins did not always have supper with Mother and Father Blossom. Sometimes they had their bread and milk at five o'clock and went to bed at half-past six. It was a treat for them to eat supper with their father.

Mother Blossom smiled at the eager faces.

"We've company coming," she announced. "Some one you love to have visit us."

"When are they coming?" asked Meg.

"To-morrow," answered Mother Blossom. "If I hadn't asked Bobby for the mail, we might have been in a great pickle. She's coming on the nine-fifty-six to-morrow morning."

"Aunt Polly!" shouted the four little Blossoms.

"Is it Aunt Polly, Mother?"

"How long will she stay?"

"Can we go to meet her?"

"Will she bring a trunk?"

Mother Blossom put her hands over her ears.

"Don't all talk at once," she begged. "Yes, Aunt Polly is coming. She can't stay long, not even a week——"

"But what do you think?" interrupted Father Blossom. "She wants the four Blossoms to go home with her!"

"Ralph, you're not a bit better than Bobby," scolded Mother Blossom. "I didn't want to tell them to-night. However, there's no use trying to keep a secret in this family. Aunt Polly has invited you all to spend the summer at Brookside Farm."

Well, of course, the children could talk of nothing else after that. Aunt Polly Hayward was Mother Blossom's eldest sister. She was a widow and lived on a fine farm many miles distant from the town of Oak Hill. She came often to visit Mother Blossom, and the children thought there was no one like her. To go to see Aunt Polly was a wonderful treat, and even Bobby, who, as the oldest of the four little Blossoms, had had more experiences than the others,

had never been away from home in his life to stay.

They were all up early the next morning, and Sam and the car took Father Blossom to the foundry immediately after breakfast so as to be back in time to meet Aunt Polly.

"Aunt Polly's coming, Norah," said Meg, happily, as Norah was clearing the table.

"Sure, and I've heard nothing else since last night," rejoined Norah. "How is the dog, your poor patient, this bright morning?"

Bobby and Twaddles and Dot looked at each other.

"The dog?" repeated Bobby. "My goodness, we forgot him!"

"I didn't forget him," Meg said. "At least, I remembered him after I was in bed. I came down to feed him, and Daddy heard me and wouldn't let me go out in my nightgown. He took him some bread and milk. And this morning I fed him before breakfast."

"How's he feel?" asked Twaddles sympathetically.

"He's ever so much better," Meg informed him. "He can wag his leg some."

"His tail, you mean," corrected Bobby. "Dogs don't wag their legs."

"They do, too," argued Meg. "Anyway this one does, so that shows he is better. And I've thought up a name for him. I'm going to call him Philip."

Bobby stared.

"What do you want to call him that for?" he said curiously.

"I read it in a book," answered Meg. "He looks as if he ought to be named Philip."

Bobby was too surprised to argue, and just then Mother Blossom called to them that Sam was coming back with the car and they hurried out to see who could go to the station.

"Aunt Polly will like to see us," declared Dot confidently. "And this dress is just as clean, Mother. There's only a tiny speck of egg on a tuck—it doesn't show a bit."

Mother Blossom sat down on the top step and pulled Dot into her lap.

"It's a duck of a clean frock," she assured her

small daughter, kissing her. "And do you know there's just one way to avoid disappointment, and we'll take it; we'll all go to meet Aunt Polly. If she has any bundles, she'll just have to leave them, or Sam can tie them on behind."

Sam grinned.

When they reached the station Mother Blossom announced that the children were to stay quietly in the car while she went around to the front platform to meet Aunt Polly.

"Do you suppose she'll bring us anything?" asked Twaddles hopefully, as Mother Blossom disappeared around the corner of the ticket window.

"That isn't polite," reproved Meg quickly. "You must be glad to see company whether they bring you things or not."

"There she is!" Dot stood up in the car and pointed. "Aunt Polly!"

"Aunt Polly!" shouted the three other little Blossoms loudly.

CHAPTER III

AUNT POLLY

AUNT POLLY was short and stout with merry blue eyes and curly dark hair that, where it showed under her pretty hat brim, was just touched with gray.

"Hello, Blessings!" she greeted the children, as they spilled out of the car to meet her. "Every one of you here? That's fine. How do you do, Sam? I've two bags there on the platform, if you will get them."

When they were all stowed away in the car, Sam put the bags in the front where he and Bobby sat, and backed the car out of the station driveway.

"Well, have you decided to come home with me?" Aunt Polly put the question to them bluntly.

The four little Blossoms glanced uncertainly at each other.

"Polly Hayward," said Mother Blossom gayly, "you know perfectly well no one could

get four children ready to take a journey in three days. Why, Dot has absolutely nothing to wear!"

"Oh, I'll lend her something," smiled Aunt Polly.

The children laughed at the idea of Auntie lending any dress of hers to small Dot.

"We'll fix it somehow," declared Aunt Polly comfortably. "I simply have to have those youngsters for a visit at Brookside. We're all getting so fat and lazy with no one to stir us up. Even the dog and cat need rousing."

"We have a dog, Aunt Polly," announced Meg, her eyes shining. "His name is Philip."

Before she had a chance to describe Philip the car reached the Blossom house and stopped at the side door.

"Here I am again, Norah," said Aunt Polly, as Norah came out to receive her.

"And 'tis glad I am to see ye, Mrs. Hayward," responded Norah heartily. "I'll take the bags, Sam. The guest room's all ready, ma'am."

The four children went as far as the guest-

room door with Aunt Polly, and then Mother Blossom waved them back.

"Auntie and I have a great deal to talk over," she said. "You run away and amuse yourselves till lunch time, like good little Blossoms."

"Wait till I give them what I've brought them," hastily interposed Aunt Polly. "Bobby, you open that black bag and the four parcels on top are for you children."

Bobby opened the bag and took out four packages neatly wrapped in paper and tied with cord.

"How'll we know which is which?" he asked.

"That's for you to find out," returned his aunt, giving him a kiss.

Mother Blossom sat down on the bed and began talking in a low tone to Aunt Polly and the four children raced downstairs and out to the garage to open their presents. They liked the garage because there was plenty of space to play in, where, indeed, they had four empty rooms above the first floor for their own uses.

This morning they rushed upstairs so fast that they never thought of Philip till, as they reached

the top step, Meg looked back and saw the little dog painfully hobbling after them on his three good legs.

"He wants to come, too," she said. "Here, Philip, come on up, good doggie."

Philip managed to finish his climb and then lay down on the floor, panting, but satisfied to be where his friends were.

"I'll give each one a package," Bobby decided. "Then we'll open them, one at a time, like Christmas. You first, Meg."

Meg ripped the string off her parcel with a single motion and pulled off the paper in such a hurry that she tore it in two. Meg always hurried to solve mysteries.

"Why, it's a game!" she cried, when she had opened the box. "All in pieces. Look!"

Bobby took a look and shrieked with delight.

"It's an airplane," he announced instantly. "That's mine, 'cause Aunt Polly knows I like experiments. What you got, Dot?"

Dot hastily unwrapped her package and discovered a doll's trunk.

"With clothes in it for Geraldine," she re-

ported, after turning the tiny key and taking a peep inside. "That's mine all right. What's Twaddles got?"

Twaddles unwrapped his parcel slowly and importantly. He was sure it was for him, and he rather enjoyed making the others wait.

"Nothing but a book," he said disgustedly. "What kind of a book is it, Bobby?"

"That's for Meg," Bobby informed him. "'Black Beauty.' Aunt Polly knows Meg likes to read and is always fussing with animals. I must have your present, Twaddles."

The four Blossoms were more interested in Twaddles' gift than in their own because it was the only one they had not seen. Bobby carefully untied the string and wound it up in a neat ring; then he slowly took off the paper and folded that; finally he opened the flat box.

Twaddles promptly tried to stand on his head, a habit he had when he was pleased. He never did succeed in standing on his head, but he usually turned a very good somersault. He did now.

"Give it to me," he shouted, bobbing right side up again. "See, Dot, it's a water pistol!"

"Well, I don't think that's a good thing to give you," pronounced Meg decisively. "You'll be hitting Dot in the eye."

"Won't, neither," retorted Twaddles, feeling unjustly accused. "Aunt Polly asked me what I wanted most last time she was here and I told her; and she said if I'd promise not to shoot at people, she'd get me one. So there!"

Bobby, the peace-maker, proposed that they all go in and show their presents to Norah, and he helped Meg carry Philip downstairs because she was sure the trip would hurt his leg. Bobby was never in too much of a hurry to do what Meg wanted him to do.

In the afternoon, after lunch, all the Blossoms went for a long ride in the car, stopping at the foundry office on the way home to pick up Father Blossom. Still nothing was said about the children going home with Aunt Polly.

"Do you suppose Mother will let us?" asked Dot, as Meg was helping her undress that night. "Maybe she's afraid I will use up my clean

dresses too fast, and Aunt Polly won't have any to put on me. But you could lend me yours, Meg."

"No, I don't believe that's the reason," said Meg slowly. "I tell you what I think—I think Mother and Daddy have to plan a lot before they know whether we can go. But you ought to be more careful with your dresses, Dot."

The next morning Mother Blossom announced that if the children would come out on the porch she had something to tell them. There was a general stampede from the breakfast table—Father Blossom had had an early breakfast and had gone before the others were down—and Aunt Polly in the swing and Mother Blossom in a huge rocking-chair were nearly smothered in a shower of kisses.

"Are we going to Brookside?"

"Are we going home with Aunt Polly?"

"Can I learn to milk a cow?"

"Do you have chickens, Aunt Polly?"

Four little voices chorused at once.

"Dear, dear," chuckled Aunt Polly. "So you've been thinking about Brookside all this

time, have you? And what makes you think your mother wants to talk about the farm with you?"

Four pairs of eyes fixed their anxious gaze upon Mother Blossom.

"Well, dearies," said Mother Blossom in answer, "Daddy and Aunt Polly and I have talked this over, and we've come to a decision. It is impossible for me to get you ready to go home with Aunt Polly to-morrow."

"Oh, Mother!" mourned Twaddles.

"Would you want to go and leave Mother?" that dear lady asked in surprise.

"Not—not exactly," stammered the little boy. "But I want to go somewhere awfully."

"Couldn't you go, too, Muddie?" suggested Meg.

"Listen, and I'll tell you what we've planned," said Mother Blossom. "Aunt Polly has to go back to-morrow. We've tried to persuade her to stay, but it seems the summer is a very bad time to be away from a farm. But a week from to-morrow, if you are all very good and help me as much as you can, I will take you to Brookside

to visit Aunt Polly for a month, or as long as she can stand four active youngsters in her quiet house."

"Hurrah!" shouted the four little Blossoms.

"Won't that be great! Let's get the trunk down right away, Mother."

"Well, I wouldn't, not till Daddy comes home," said Aunt Polly, fanning herself and smiling. "A week is plenty of time, and I hear that Dot has to have some new frocks made."

"Is Daddy coming?" Bobby asked suddenly.

"I wanted him to, for I think he needs a rest," said Aunt Polly soberly. "But the most we could get him to promise was that he might come up with your mother when it is time for you to go home."

"Mother's going—she said so," Meg reminded her aunt.

"Only to take you to Brookside, Daughter," explained Mother Blossom. "Then I am coming home again to stay with Daddy. You see, I couldn't leave him alone in this house for a whole month. Think how lonesome he would be."

Twaddles thought this over for a moment.

"Well, I guess it will be a change for him, 'thout any children," he remarked, with a sunny smile.

Aunt Polly scooped him into her lap and gave him a big hug.

"Now where in the world did you get that idea?" she said.

"I found it," confided Twaddles cheerfully.

Dot had already disappeared. She thought it time to begin her packing. Presently they heard her in the house tumbling books out of the book-case on to the polished floor.

"Glory be, whatever are ye doing?" came Norah's cry. "Haven't I enough to be doing, without ye upsetting a room as fast as I put it in order?"

CHAPTER IV

THE WILLING PACKERS

MEG rushed into the house.

"Dot Blossom, you're not to touch my books," she scolded. "The idea! Why don't you fuss with your own things?"

Dot looked vexed.

"I'm helping you," she explained. "Don't you want to take your books to Aunt Polly's to read rainy days? Well, then, I'll pack 'em for you."

Mother Blossom had followed Meg, and now she intervened.

"No one is to pack anything to-day," she said firmly. "I want Dot to go into town with a message for Miss Florence. And Meg must practice on the piano half an hour at least. This afternoon we're going to take Aunt Polly driving. After she goes home there will be plenty for all of us to do to get ready."

Miss Florence Davis was the dressmaker who often came to the house to make clothes for the

Blossom children, and Dot set off presently for her house, carrying a note to her. Miss Florence had no telephone. She said she wasn't home long enough to answer it. But she always left a slip of paper pinned to her door to tell people at whose house she was sewing, and her customers were used to going about the town till they found her.

"She says she can come," reported Dot when she returned from her errand. "She can give you four days, Mother. Where are the boys?"

Mother Blossom looked at her small daughter and sighed.

"I thought you knew Sam painted the fence last night," she said mildly.

"I did, but I forgot," explained Dot, trying to fold over a pleat so that the vivid streaks of green paint would not show. "I guess I kind of brushed up against it, Mother."

Usually when Aunt Polly went home the four little Blossoms were disconsolate, but the next morning they saw her to the station quite cheerfully. Were they not going to Brookside themselves exactly one week from that day?

"Now we must fly around and get ready," announced Bobby, when they returned to the house. Bobby had a great trick of remembering speeches he had heard older folk make.

"Indeed then and you must," agreed Norah, who was sweeping the porch. "Your mother wants Dot in the sewing room. Miss Florence is ready to try on. And, Bobby, it's sorry I am, but we're out of soap."

It was rather a long walk to the grocery store, and Bobby didn't think that going for soap promised one bit of excitement. Neither did Meg want to practice the piano scales that one day were to make her a good musician. Norah knew something of what they were thinking.

"You'll both be helping your mother to get ready to go," she said earnestly and kindly. "I've got extra washing to do, for all your clothes must be clean. And if Meg's going to stop learning music every time a new plan comes up, she'll grow up to be terrible ignorant of lots of things."

"All right, I'm going," said Bobby quickly,

"An' you'll be through by the time I get back, Meg. Then I guess we can pack the toys."

Twaddles, left alone, wandered up to the sewing room.

"Hello, Twaddles," said Miss Florence pleasantly. "Have you come up to see what pretty dresses Dot is going to have? And what is this I hear about every one going to Brookside?"

"We're going to see Aunt Polly," explained Twaddles. "And, Mother, can we take toys? Bobby's all ready to pack 'em as soon as he gets back."

"If you don't pack something pretty soon, the house won't hold you," observed Mother Blossom, smiling. "You see, Twaddles dear, Mother doesn't believe you will need many toys at Brookside. There will be so many wonderful new out-of-door things for you to play with. Suppose we say that each of you may choose the two things you are fondest of. That won't make so much to carry."

So that was settled, and when Bobby came back from town and Meg had finished practicing her scales and Dot's three new dresses had all

been tried on, the children went upstairs to their playroom to select the toys they thought they would want to take with them.

"I think we ought to take the things Aunt Polly gave us," announced Meg. "They're new, and we haven't played with them much. She might think we didn't like 'em if we left them at home."

"All right, we will," decided Bobby. "And I'll take my ball and bat. Guess I won't break Aunt Polly's windows. There must be lots of room on a farm."

"I'm going to take the paper dolls," said Meg. "I'm pretty sure Aunt Polly will have books to read, so that's all right. What you going to take, Dot?"

"Geraldine and Tottie-Fay and the trunk," was the prompt response.

"That's three," Meg reminded her. "Mother said we could each have two. I tell you—you don't need the trunk; just take Geraldine's new clothes."

"All right," acquiesced Dot briefly.

Tottie-Fay was an old dollie, but dearly loved,

and, as Father Blossom said when he heard that she was going to Brookside, no one could need a change of air more.

"I'm going to carry my kiddie-car," declared Twaddles serenely.

The others protested that the kiddie-car wouldn't go in the trunk; that there would be no pavement on which to ride it; that Twaddles should take a smaller toy.

Twaddles listened politely and set his obstinate little chin firmly. He meant to take the kiddie-car.

"We'll express it," said Father Blossom kindly that night. "I'm going to send a porch swing up and a—— Oh, my goodness, I almost told you. And it is a *surprise!*"

"What is it?" cried the four little Blossoms eagerly. "Tell us, Daddy! Ah, do! Please!"

"It can be a surprise for Aunt Polly," suggested Meg artfully. "Won't you tell us, Daddy?"

"No. I like surprises that are surprises," asserted Father Blossom. "Now, not another

word does any one get out of me on this subject. Not a word."

The next few days were very busy ones; but at last two trunks were brought down and placed in the hall, and Mother Blossom made lists and packed and explained her plans to Meg and Bobby, who, as the oldest, could be expected to remember.

"All the stockings are here, dear, right in this tray," Mother Blossom would say. "And I'm putting Bobby's blouses in this trunk. You are sure you will remember so that Aunt Polly needn't be bothered in case I don't get both trunks unpacked for you?"

Meg was sure she could remember.

"Where's Twaddles?" asked Mother Blossom the last afternoon, when she was putting in the very final things. "I haven't seen him since lunch time. Dot, do you know where he went?"

"I think he's watching Sam give Philip a bath," volunteered Bobby. "He likes the smell of that dog soap, Mother."

"I can't say I do," said Mother Blossom

frankly. "It is strongly carbolic. Go and call him in, will you, Bobby?"

Bobby found Twaddles blissfully watching the shivering Philip enduring a last rinsing after his bath. Sam liked to keep him clean, and he said that because a dog had a broken leg was no reason why he shouldn't be washed.

"Mother says for you to come in," Bobby told his brother. "It's time to get ready for supper. Gee, that soap does smell, doesn't it?"

"I like it," Twaddles affirmed, sniffing luxuriously. "I wish we took baths with that kind."

Mother Blossom sent him to the bathroom to wash his face and hands and she brushed his hair for him herself.

"What is that I keep smelling?" she asked once or twice. "Oh, the carbolic dog-soap. Twaddles, I do wish you wouldn't handle it so much."

"Who's been to the drug store?" said Father Blossom, when they sat down to supper. "Phew! I smell carbolic, strong."

"Philip had a bath," explained Twaddles uneasily. "Perhaps you smell it, Daddy."

"Twaddles means the soap," giggled Meg. "You can't smell a bath, silly."

Father Blossom laid down his carving knife and fork.

"I can't stand that," he declared positively. "Twaddles, you needn't tell me just handling a soapy dog is responsible for the whiffs of carbolic I'm getting. What is that in your pocket?"

A dark wet stain was slowly spreading in the square little pocket of the blouse Twaddles wore.

"I—I saved a piece," he stammered. "I thought Spotty, Aunt Polly's dog, ought to have some. It's awful healthy for dogs, Daddy. Sam says so."

Father Blossom had to laugh.

"I don't doubt it," he admitted. "But that's no reason why we should have to smell it. Wrap it up and put it away if you like for Spotty. And then come back and we'll see if we can finish supper in peace."

CHAPTER V

DOT'S ADVENTURE

"GOOD-BY, Daddy! Good-by, Daddy dear! Good-by, dear, darling Daddy!" The four little Blossoms all tried to hug their father at once. They were at the station, where Sam and the car had brought them, and the train that was to take them on the first lap of the journey to Aunt Polly's farm was turning the curve down the track.

"Be good," said Father Blossom, speaking as clearly as he could with Dot hanging around his neck and Twaddles pounding his chest affectionately. "Help Mother all you can, and be sure to write me nice letters."

The long, shiny train glided into the station, and there was a scramble among the people waiting on the platform. Apparently every one wanted to be the first to get on. It took Mother and Father Blossom and Sam and the jolly conductor to see that all four of the little Blossoms

and the two bags were stowed away comfortably in two seats.

Then Father Blossom and Sam got off and stood on the platform talking through the open window until the train began to move slowly.

"Good-by!" shouted the children. "Good-by, Daddy! Good-by, Sam!"

Meg leaned over Twaddles, who was seated next to the window.

"Don't forget to feed Philip," she cried.

Sam waved his hand to show that he heard and understood, and the train went faster and faster. In a few minutes Oak Hill station was far behind them.

"Now we're started," announced Bobby, with satisfaction.

"Did my kiddie-car get on?" asked Twaddles anxiously. "S'posing they forgot it?"

"Is that why you were hanging round the baggage-room?" demanded Bobby. "Course the kiddie-car is on. I saw Mr. Hayes putting it on. You ask the conductor."

But the conductor, who came through presently for tickets, didn't know.

"I tell you what you do," he said, his eyes twinkling at Twaddles. "You ask the brakesman to take you into the baggage car and let you look around. Then you can see for yourself."

"But that is making a great deal of trouble," protested Mother Blossom. "You can easily wait till we get to Brookside, dear."

"Let him go, let him go," advised the conductor cheerily. "It will kind of break up the monotony of the trip, ma'am. These little folks are going to get pretty tired before they get to Alawana."

So Twaddles marched off importantly with the conductor to find the young, good-natured brakesman, and the three little Blossoms rather wished they could go, too.

"What happens when we get to Alawana, Mother?" asked Bobby. "Do we change cars?"

"No, dear, we take the boat," explained Mother Blossom. "If the train is on time we have an hour to wait, which will allow us to have lunch; then we take a steamer that takes us up Lake Tobago to Little Havre. There we take a stage, or a wagon, or whatever they have to

meet the boat, and ride to Four Crossways; and there Aunt Polly meets us and drives us over to Brookside."

"Here comes Twaddles," announced Dot. "Did you find the kiddie car?" she asked.

"Yes, it's there," reported Twaddles, squeezing in past Meg, and climbing into his place beside his twin. "There's lots of trunks and things there, too."

During the long stretches when the train hummed steadily along and there was nothing to be seen from the car windows but miles and miles of green fields and woods with here and there a house, the children played a game Mother Blossom had known when she was a little girl.

"My ship is loaded with apples," Bobby would say.

"My ship is loaded with apricots," Meg would declare.

Dot usually had to think a minute.

"My ship is loaded with—with ashes," she might announce finally.

"My ship is loaded with at;" this from Twaddles.

"Oh, Twaddles!" Bobby would scold. "You can't load a ship with 'at.' That isn't anything."

"'Tis, too," maintained Twaddles stubbornly. "It begins with 'a,' doesn't it? And it's a word. So there."

If Twaddles had his way and was excused from thinking up another word, it would be Mother Blossom's turn.

"My ship is loaded with asters," she might say, smiling.

When no one could think of another word that began with A, they would go on to B. This game amused the children for many minutes at a time. They had just started on words beginning with C when the train reached Alawana.

"I'm hungry," declared Meg, when they all stood together on the platform and the train that had brought them from Oak Hill was nothing but a black speck in the distance. "We had breakfast an awful long time ago."

"I guess it was yesterday," said Dot mournfully.

Mother Blossom laughed.

"Poor chickens, you are hungry," she said. "Never mind, I see a nice little restaurant across the street. Let me find out when the boat goes, and then we'll have a good, hot lunch."

The Lake Tobago boat, Mother Blossom found out, left in half an hour. Their train had been late. However, the dock was not far off, and Mother Blossom was sure they would have time for sandwiches and milk at least.

All the children were tremendously excited at the thought of going on a steamer, as not one of them had ever been on a boat. There was no lake or river near Oak Hill, and the largest body of water the four little Blossoms had seen was the town reservoir.

"If they have sails, I'm going to roll 'em up and down," Dot announced, so thrilled at the prospect that she upset her glass of milk down the front of her frock.

"You'll have to wear it," said Mother Blossom, mopping her as dry as she could with a

napkin. "Perhaps I can put a dry dress on you on the boat. Now try to eat quietly, dear; we haven't much time."

The shower-bath of milk rather subdued Dot for the moment, and lunch was finished without further mishap. Then a brief walk through the pretty little country town brought them to the lake.

"O-oh! Isn't it lovely!" breathed Meg. "Just see how it sparkles in the sun. Don't you like it, Dot?"

"It's all right," agreed Dot carelessly.

Her quick eyes had spied an old organ grinder and his monkey on the other side of the dock. She slipped under the rope, where the people who wanted to take the boat were standing, and ran over to the music.

"We needn't have hurried," said Mother Blossom, coming back to her little folk. She had been to the office to have the baggage checks looked after. "The boat is held up for another half hour because of some engine trouble. Where's Dot?"

Well, where was Dot? Meg had thought her

little sister was standing next to her. The boys were sure she had been just behind them. Where was Dot?

She stood in the crowd gathered about the organ grinder, a little girl with shining dark eyes and a milk-splashed frock, watching the clever bowing and scraping of the small monkey with evident delight. Then a sudden movement of the people about her startled her. She remembered that she was supposed to go somewhere with the rest of her family. She saw people hurrying toward a large automobile with nine or ten long seats in it, and she hurried toward it, too. A man helped her up the high step, and she found a seat just behind the driver.

The automobile was lumbering up a narrow white road with woods on either side of it before Dot realized where she was.

"Why, this isn't the boat!" she said aloud.

The lady seated next to her glanced at her curiously.

"The boat?" she repeated. "This jitney goes to Fermarsh. You're not traveling all alone, are you, little girl? You don't look more'n five."

"I was four in June," announced Dot with dignity. "Twaddles was, too. We're twins. But I have to go to Little Havre on the boat."

"You're going in the opposite direction," said the woman placidly. She did not seem to care. "What's that on your dress?"

Dot's tears brimmed over.

"Milk," she sobbed. "I tipped it over. An' I have to go on the boat with my mother."

The jitney driver heard and turned.

"What's this?" he asked. "You belong on the boat, little girl? Well, now, don't cry; we'll fix it. I heard they had engine trouble to-day, and like as not they'll be late starting. Long up the road a spell we'll meet the two o'clock jitney coming back, and I'll see that Dave Gunn takes you in with him. An' if you do miss the boat my wife 'll take care of you over night and we'll ship you up to Little Havre on to-morrow's boat."

Dot felt that the jitney driver was very kind, but she hoped with all her heart that she would not have to stay all night in a strange house. She wanted her mother, and Twaddles and Meg and

Bobby. She hadn't known till this minute how dearly she loved them.

Sure enough, their jitney had not gone very far when they saw another jitney coming toward them.

"Hi, Dave!" called the driver of Dot's jitney. "Got a passenger for you. A little lady who tangled up her traveling directions and missed getting on the boat. You take her with you, and see that she lands on the steamer."

Mr. Gunn stopped his machine and came over to the other jitney.

"Come on, Sister," he said pleasantly, lifting Dot down gently.

"Why, you are little to be traveling on your own. I've got three home 'bout your size."

Mother Blossom, as you may suppose, had been nearly frantic all this time. She had taken the other children on board the boat and had left them on deck with the bags, after they had promised not to stir from the spot where she left them, and she had been going up and down the dock making inquiries, and even walking up

into the town, believing that perhaps some of the store windows had attracted Dot.

No one remembered seeing a little girl in a green dress and a brown straw hat.

Just as Mother Blossom was wearily wondering if she should telegraph Father Blossom that Dot was lost, a motor jitney lumbered down to the dock. Some one in a green dress and a brown straw hat was sitting on the front seat beside the driver.

"Mother! Mother!" shouted Dot.

There was just time for her to tumble out of the car into her mother's arms, just time for Mother Blossom to give the driver a dollar bill and say a word of thanks, and then the steamboat whistle blew loudly once.

"That means she's starting," said the jitney man. "Run!"

And hand in hand, Mother Blossom and Dot raced down the wharf and over the gangplank on to the deck of the boat, just as it began to slide away.

CHAPTER VI

BROOKSIDE AT LAST

"WE thought you weren't coming," said Meg anxiously.

"Where did you find Dot?" asked Bobby and Twaddles in the same breath.

Dot smiled serenely.

"I came back myself," she informed them. "The jitney man told me how."

Mother Blossom sat down on a camp-stool and fanned herself with Twaddles' blue sailor hat.

"See if we can't get to Brookside without any more mishaps," she commanded the children. "If we had missed the boat, think of the worry and trouble for Aunt Polly. Even if we telegraphed she wouldn't get it before she started over to meet us."

The four little Blossoms promised to be very good and to stay close together.

Lake Tobago was a small lake, very pretty, and for some minutes the children saw enough on the shores they were passing to keep them

contented and interested. In one place two little boys and their father were out fishing in a row-boat and the steamer passed so close to them that the four little Blossoms, leaning over the rail, could almost shake hands with them.

"There's another wharf! Do we stop there? Yes, we do! Come on, Dot, let's watch!" shouted Twaddles, as the steamer headed inshore toward a pier built out into the water.

"Keep away from the gangplank," warned Mother Blossom. "You mustn't get in people's way, dear."

The pier was something of a disappointment, because when the boat tied up there the children discovered that only freight was to be taken off and more boxes carried on. There was only one man at the wharf, and apparently no town for miles.

"Doesn't anybody live here?" asked Twaddles, almost climbing over the rail in his eagerness to see everything.

"Sure! There's a town back about half a mile," explained the deck-hand who was carry-

ing on a crate of live chickens. "This is just where farmers drive in with their stuff."

"Let me see the chickens," cried Dot, climbing up beside her brother.

Her elbow knocked his hat, and because he hadn't the elastic under his chin, it went sailing over on to the wharf. One of the men rolling a barrel toward the steamer did not see the hat and calmly rolled his barrel over it.

"Now you've done it!" scolded Meg, in her big-sister anxiety. "That's a fine-looking hat to go to see Aunt Polly in. Hey, please, will you bring it back here with you?"

The man with the barrel heard and turned. He picked up the shapeless broken straw that had been Twaddles' best new hat, and brought it to them, grinning. Several people who had been watching laughed.

"It does look funny, doesn't it?" said Meg. "You'd better go and show it to Mother, Twaddles."

Twaddles went back to Mother Blossom and dangled his hat before her sadly.

"Oh, Twaddles!" she sighed. "Is that your

hat? And we're miles from a store. Here, let me straighten out the brim. What happened to it? Where did you go?"

Twaddles said truthfully enough that he hadn't been anywhere, and explained what had happened to the hat. The boat was out in the lake again by this time and steaming on toward Little Havre.

"Where are the others?" asked Mother Blossom. "Tell them we get off in fifteen or twenty minutes, and I want them all to come and stay near me."

Presently the boat scraped alongside a wide wharf and a number of people began to bustle off.

"Where are we going now?" asked Twaddles, his round eyes dancing with excitement. Twaddles certainly loved traveling.

"Don't you 'member?" said Meg importantly. "We have to go to Four Crossways, and Aunt Polly will meet us. There's a bus that says 'Four Crossways,' Mother."

Mother Blossom had to see about the trunks and the kiddie-car, which, it seemed, were all

to go in a queer contrivance attached to the motor bus, a "trailer," the driver called it.

"Isn't that nice?" beamed Bobby, when he heard of this arrangement. "Our trunks will get there the same time we do."

The children watched this trailer being loaded, and then all climbed into the bus and began the journey to Four Crossways. There were so many people on their way there that Bobby and Twaddles had to be squeezed into the front seat between the driver and the man who took the fares, and they liked this immensely.

"We're going to Brookside," volunteered Twaddles, who was sociably inclined, as soon as the driver seemed to have his engine fixed to suit him and the car was purring up the straight, wide road.

"To see Aunt Polly," chimed in Bobby.

"There's a lot of you, isn't there?" said the driver, smiling.

When both boys said they had never been on a real farm, the driver, whose name, he told them, was Gus Rede, had so much to say about

the fun that awaited boys on a farm and especially such a fine place as Brookside that before Bobby and Twaddles knew it the bus had driven up to the post-office and there was dear Aunt Polly waiting to welcome them.

"Bless their hearts," she said warmly, when she had kissed Mother and had hold of a child with either hand. "Are they all tired out, poor lambs? It's a fearful place to get to, especially the first trip."

Mother Blossom assured her sister that they were all right, and as glad to see her as she was to see them.

"I left the car around on a side street," explained Aunt Polly, leading the way. "You see so many horses are still afraid of automobiles that we think it more thoughtful not to leave 'em standing on the main street. Yes, I drove over alone for you—either Peter or Jud will come over to-morrow for your trunks."

This last was in response to a question Mother Blossom had asked.

Aunt Polly's car was large enough to hold them all comfortably. Dot and Twaddles fell

into a little doze, leaning against Mother Blossom. They had had rather a long day. But Meg and Bobby sat up very straight and asked questions whenever Aunt Polly was not speaking to their mother.

"Who's Peter and Jud?" Bobby wanted to know first.

"Peter Apgar is my tenant farmer and runs the farm for me," said Aunt Polly, pulling over to one side of the road to let a huge load of hay go past. "Jud is his son. You'll like Jud. They live in a house about a quarter of a mile from our house."

"How is Spotty?" came from Meg. "I thought maybe you'd bring him with you."

"Spotty is very lively and well," answered Aunt Polly. "I like a farm dog to stay at home and watch things, so I've never trained him to ride in the car with me. By the way, Meg, we have a new addition to our animal family that I'm sure you'll like."

Meg was immediately curious—what was it?

"The blackest cat you ever saw," said Aunt Polly. "And I think probably the largest. He

is so shiny, and not a white hair on him! He belonged to the people on the next farm, but spent about half his time with me; so when they sold and moved away last week Poots was given to me to keep."

"Is that his name—Poots?" inquired Meg. "How funny!"

"Well, he's a funny cat," replied her aunt. "And now, children, if you look sharp you'll see Brookside!"

She turned the car into a neat graveled roadway which parted a pretty concrete wall exactly in half, while Twaddles was puzzling how those things that looked to him like chickens could ever turn into big juicy turkeys.

Eagerly the four little Blossoms tumbled out. They saw a compact, modern house that looked even from the outside as if one might find all sorts of unexpected corners within. A green lawn bordered each side of the driveway, and in one direction was a red-tiled house with smoke coming out of the chimney and in another a birdhouse perched on a high pole near the gate the four little Blossoms had just come through.

Bobby spied the other house and Meg saw the home for the birds, just as people always see whatever they are most interested in first.

"Flowers!" said Dot.

She had seen the hollyhocks that stood up straight and tall against the fence that shut off the back of Aunt Polly's house.

Peter Apgar had come up to take the car and perhaps to see the new arrivals. The four little Blossoms liked him at once, and when he spoke in a soft, lazy drawl that was good-nature itself they knew he was going to be a good friend.

"Can't say you're lonesome now, Miss Polly," he chuckled pleasantly. He always called her Miss Polly, never Mrs. Hayward. "And I guess Jud is as good as useless to me the rest of the summer. What these youngsters don't think up to do, he will," the farmer added, with a broad grin.

CHAPTER VII

THE WRECK OF THE RAFT

THOUGH all of the four little Blossoms protested that they were not the least bit sleepy, it was not long after Mother and Aunt Polly had helped them to delicious brown bread and honey and milk and baked apples that they were stumbling up the stairs to baths and bed. Linda, a girl about fifteen, who lived with Aunt Polly and went to school in the winter and worked during the summer, had made the two pretty bedrooms as dainty as possible and had left a vase of flowers on the table in each room. It was Linda, too, who brought armfuls of clean towels and showed them which was the hot and which the cold water in Aunt Polly's white and green bathroom.

The next day the four children and Mother Blossom and Aunt Polly, with Linda and Jud part of the time and Spotty and Poots in constant attendance, explored Brookside thoroughly.

They saw the poultry yard, where ducks and chickens and guinea-hens and one lame turkey lived happily together. The other turkeys roamed all over the farm, and Aunt Polly said that at night they slept out of doors in the trees. She said they would be sick if cooped up in houses, and that they had to roam half-wild to thrive.

The visitors called on Mrs. Sally Sweet, the beautiful gentle Jersey cow that gave such wonderful rich milk; they saw the seven new little white pigs; they took salt to the sheep that were in a stony pasture and that came running when Peter called to them from the bars.

They made the acquaintance, too, of Jerry and Terry, the two faithful farm horses, and Nelly Bly, the brown mare who had a small colt, Felix, by her side. Meg had to be dragged away from the colt. She said she had never seen such a darling little horse.

Jud Apgar was a tall, lanky boy, with the same pleasant drawling way of speaking his father had, and the "evenest temper that ever was,"

Linda said. Linda should have known, because she was a great tease.

On their way back from the sheep pasture Aunt Polly and the Blossoms stopped at the tenant house, and Mrs. Apgar asked them in to taste of her fresh buttermilk. She had just finished churning, and the children saw their first churn. They admired the firm yellow butter, but they did not care much for the buttermilk, though Mother Blossom drank two glasses of it and said it was delicious.

It was nearly dinner time now, for Aunt Polly, like many people who live in the country, liked to have her dinner at noon, and they all hurried home to get freshened up for the meal. Poor Dot, as usual, had managed to soil her frock, and she had to be buttoned into a clean dress.

"How'd you ever get that old egg on it?" scolded Meg, nevertheless helping her to fasten the buttons.

"I didn't know eggs broke so easy," explained Dot. "I was looking in a nest where a hen was

sitting, and she flew up and scared me. And I just touched one of her eggs and it broke."

Meg happened to glance from the window.

"Peter's brought the trunks!" she cried. "And the kiddie-car and a bundle that must be the surprise Daddy told us about. Hurry, Dot."

The two little girls ran downstairs and found the others gathered about the trunks and parcels on the front porch.

"Daddy's surprise!" shouted Bobby. "Let me open it, Mother?"

Mother Blossom handed him the shears and he cut the heavy cord. Something brown and heavy was inside.

"It's a dress. No, it isn't, it's a tent! It's a tent and four Indian suits!" Bobby was so delighted that he gave a war-whoop then and there and began to do a war dance.

"An Indian suit!" shrieked Twaddles, trying to stand on his head.

"Indian beads!" cried Meg, holding up a long chain of bright colored glass beads.

"And feathers!" Dot, too, had been digging in the package.

The rest of the afternoon was a busy time for them all. Jud helped them set up the tent on the side lawn, and then the four little Blossoms dressed up in their new suits and played Indians to their hearts' content. There were jackets and trousers and feather head-dresses for Bobby and Twaddles and squaw costumes and bead chains for Meg and Dot. Jud made them each a wooden hatchet, which completed the make-believe.

The next morning Mother Blossom had to go back to Oak Hill. The children went as far as the gate to say good-by to her, but both she and Aunt Polly, who was to drive her over, not in the car but with Nelly Bly and a smart-looking red-wheeled buggy, thought that it was better for them not to go to town.

When they had kissed her good-by and watched the buggy till it was nothing but a cloud of dust in the road, the four little Blossoms began to feel very queer indeed. They had never been alone in a strange place without any mother before.

"Well, my goodness, if you're not here," said

Jud cheerily, coming up behind them. He pretended not to see the tears beginning to splash down Dot's cheeks. "I'm going down to the brook to mend the line fence, and I thought if you wanted to come along and play in the water——"

They did, of course. Dot slipped her hand into Jud's and the others followed, talking busily. What was a line fence? How could he fix it? What could they play in the water?

Jud didn't mind questions at all. Indeed, he rather enjoyed answering them.

"You see, this fence goes along the brook right in the center," he explained carefully, "to show where your Aunt Polly's land stops and Mr. Simmond's land begins. If we didn't have a fence there his cattle would walk right through the brook and up into our meadows. Say, build a raft, why don't you? I always did when I was a kid. Here, I'll show you."

Jud in a few minutes had shown Bobby how to make a little raft, and he and Twaddles finished it while Meg and Dot ran up to the house to get some toys to sail on it. For a raft, you

know if you have ever made one, is no fun at all unless it has a cargo.

"We brought Geraldine!" cried Dot, running back, out of breath, with her best doll. "And now I wish I'd brought her trunk. But here's Meg's 'Black Beauty' book. She says we can play that's a trunk. It's heavy. And Meg is bringing your airplane, Bobby, and the singing bird for Twaddles."

The singing bird was a little toy one of the neighbors in Oak Hill had given Twaddles. It had come from abroad, and he was very proud of it. It was a tiny yellow wooden bird that wound up with a key and sang three tunes for all the world like a music box.

Bobby fixed the string, and the children arranged the toys on the raft, the smiling Geraldine occupying the place of honor in the center and leaning gracefully against the book which served her as a prop.

"Look, Jud!" shouted Bobby. "See it float!"

Jud, in the middle of the stream, waved his hand encouragingly.

"It's beginning to sprinkle," he called. "Bet-

ter run on up to the barn, out of the wet. You'll find Dad working there. Tie your raft—this is only a shower."

Bobby obediently tied the raft to a tree root that extended out over the water, and the four little Blossoms, taking hold of hands, raced madly for the barn. They were only just in time, for as they reached the door the rain fell in sheets.

"Most caught you, didn't it?" chuckled Peter, who was mending harness in a little room that opened on to the barn floor. "A rain like this could drown that littlest one."

"No, it couldn't," protested Dot, who was the "littlest one."

"Maybe Jud will drown," worried Bobby. "Does he stay out in the wet?"

"A bit of rain doesn't hurt Jud," said Peter comfortably. "He's used to it, and his mother has dry clothes ready for him when he comes in. Well now, look around, and make yourselves at home. You can do most anything in Miss Polly's barn."

"Let's play see-saw," proposed Meg, point-

ing to a long board that stood in the corner. "Could we have that, Mr. Peter?"

"Of course you can. I'll lay it across this saw-horse, so, and that's as fine a see-saw as any one could ask for," said Peter, lifting the heavy plank with ease.

Bobby and Meg took possession of the see-saw, and Dot and Twaddles made the simultaneous discovery that hay was slippery. They found this out because Twaddles had climbed to the top of a pile of loose hay and was intending to reach an open window when his foot slipped and he gently slid down to the floor.

"Let me do that," cried Dot, hastily scrambling up. "Watch me, Meg."

She sat down, gave herself a little shove and neatly slid down the side of the hay. Then Twaddles tried, and then they took turns.

Spotty appeared at the barn door, wagging his tail engagingly. He was "part white terrier" and "part something else" Jud had told the children, and he had one funny black spot on his back near his tail.

In less than half an hour the rain had stopped

and a watery sun was struggling through the breaking clouds.

"Bobby!" Meg thought of something so suddenly, she stopped the see-saw with a bump that jarred poor Bobby's teeth. "What do you know about the things we left on the raft? Geraldine will be soaked!"

"And the wings of my airplane," cried Bobby. "Why, I never thought! We should have taken the toys off. Let's get 'em now, and maybe Linda can dry them in the kitchen for us."

Hastily calling the twins, Meg and Bobby set off, running for the brook. The grass was very wet and their shoes were soaked in a few minutes. But they didn't mind that if only the toys were not damaged!

Bobby reached the brook first. No Jud was in sight, but a neat, firm fence showed where he had completed his work. No raft was tied to the root, either.

"It's gone!" gasped Meg, who had followed Bobby closely. "My lovely book I've never even read yet!"

"And my airplane I meant to have such fun

sailing out where there is lots of room," said Bobby mournfully. "Dot, the raft's floated away!"

Dot and Twaddles came up to them and Dot at first could not believe the bad news.

"But you tied it, Bobby," she urged. "How could it get gone?"

"Don't say 'get gone,'" said Bobby absently. "I don't know how it got loose, but it has. You can see for yourself. And all our toys are lost!"

"Poor, poor Geraldine!" sobbed Geraldine's little mother. "All drowned! And Twaddles' Dicky bird! Maybe, couldn't Jud have them, Bobby?" she added suddenly.

Bobby had not thought of that.

"You run and ask him," he said, "while we walk down the brook a way and look for 'em."

CHAPTER VIII

LEARNING TO MILK

DOT ran off to the Apgar house as fast as her short legs would carry her, to find Jud and ask him if he had taken their toys in out of the rain. The other children followed Bobby along the brook.

"Because our feet are as wet as they can be, now," he said. "and if Aunt Polly is going to scold, getting them wetter won't make her scold any more."

"It looks like more rain," worried Meg, scanning the clouds. "Why don't we go back, Bobby, and come out after dinner? If the raft floated as far as the woods, the trees will keep it dry."

Bobby was very damp and very hungry, and he, too, thought that after dinner would be a better time to hunt for the toys.

"Come on, Twaddles," he shouted. "We're going back."

Twaddles was some distance ahead, and he

turned so quickly that one foot slipped. Meg and Bobby saw him tumble into the brook with a loud splash.

It wasn't very deep, but it was very wet, and though Bobby reached him in a second, poor Twaddles was frightened.

"I'm so co-old!" he wept loudly. "I want Mother!"

"Well, don't stand here all day," said Bobby practically. "Take hold of Meg's hand, and we'll run to the house. Linda was making soup this morning, Twaddles. Think how good nice, hot soup will taste!"

Meg took his hand, and, Bobby on the other side, Twaddles ran with all his might toward dry clothes and hot soup. It was raining hard again.

"Why, children!" Aunt Polly met them at the door, for she had long ago come back from taking Mother Blossom to town. "Has anything happened? I found Dot in the hammock crying for her doll and—— But Twaddles is dripping!"

"He fell in the brook," explained Bobby concisely.

"Poor lamb!" comforted Aunt Polly. "Come upstairs, dear, and Auntie will see that you're rubbed dry. And Bobby and Meg, don't stand around in those wet shoes one minute. Change them immediately."

Half an hour later four clean, dry little Blossoms were at the table enjoying Linda's delicious soup and other good things. The day had turned to a cold, rainy, dismal one, very different from the promise of the sunny summer morning. Aunt Polly said they would have to manufacture their own sunshine that afternoon.

"You mustn't think of going to hunt for the toys till to-morrow, and only then if it's clear," she announced firmly. "Likely as not the raft sank, and you mustn't feel too bad about the toys. You'll find plenty of other things to play with on the farm."

All that afternoon it poured, and all that afternoon the four little Blossoms spent in Linda's kitchen cooking and pulling molasses candy. They had the sweetiest, stickiest time

you ever heard of, and when about six o'clock the rain stopped and the sun came out pure yellow gold, they had a plate of beautiful cream-colored candy to take to Mrs. Peter Apgar.

"Who wants to help me milk?" asked Jud, passing the kitchen door as they were talking to his mother.

"Oh, Jud, I do!" begged Meg. "You promised to show me how."

"We'll all come," said Bobby. "Aunt Polly isn't going to have supper till seven o'clock tonight, 'cause the minister is coming. We've got oceans of time."

"Dot looks dressed up to me," announced Jud. "Keep her out of the mud, somebody."

"This is my prettiest dress," said Dot serenely, smoothing down the folds of her white dotted swiss under her coral-colored sweater.

Mrs. Sally Sweet looked mildly interested when she saw such a number of people coming into her comfortable barnyard, and when Jud drove her into the barn and fastened her in the stanchion, all the children stood around to watch.

When Jud had the pail nearly full of milk, he rose carefully.

"Now, Meg," he said, "you sit here. Easy now; don't be nervous. Don't you know a cow won't give milk if she knows you're nervous? Now work your fingers like this——"

Meg sat on the three-legged stool and tried to do exactly as Jud told her. Bobby and Dot and Twaddles stared at her open-mouthed. She was actually milking a live cow!

"Keep right on; that's fine," encouraged Jud. "You're doing first rate."

His father called him just then, and he ran to the door to see what was wanted. Meg, beaming, kept on milking. All would have been well if Mrs. Sally Sweet hadn't remembered her calf, Buttercup, and opened her mouth to give a tremendous and unexpected, *"Moo!"*

The four little Blossoms were sadly startled. Meg jumped up, upsetting the pail of milk over herself and Bobby, who stood nearest, and knocking down Twaddles and Dot who were close behind her. As luck would have it, both twins pitched into a heap of soft hay and were

not hurt at all. But when they scrambled to their feet, alas! streams of yellow, bright yellow, decorated Dot's sweater and dress and splashed Twaddles' middy blouse.

"For goodness' sake!" cried Jud, coming back in time to view this wholesale damage. "What have you been up to now?"

Meg explained.

"There must have been eggs in that hay," said Twaddles disapprovingly.

"Some hen stole her nest, and you've finished her hopes," sighed Jud. "I must say you're a sweet looking mess. Wonder what Miss Polly will say?"

"My! and the minister's coming to supper," announced Bobby, remembering this for the first time.

"I thought you looked dressed up," Jud groaned. "I suppose I ought to have paid more attention. Well, come on, we'll go up the back way and I'll tell Miss Polly most of it was my fault."

The four little Blossoms, eggy and milky, followed Jud up to the house. He meant to take

them in through the kitchen in case the minister should be on the front porch and so spare Aunt Polly's company the sight of such a forlorn procession. But, just as they rounded the back of the house, they met Aunt Polly showing the minister and his wife her kitchen garden.

"Twaddles!" gasped poor Aunt Polly, for Twaddles was ahead.

"We—we—we were learning to milk," said Meg apologetically.

The minister and his wife took one look at the four, and then they sat down on the back doorstep and laughed and laughed. After a minute Aunt Polly joined them, and then the children and Jud began to giggle.

"Hurry and get into something clean," commanded Aunt Polly, wiping her eyes. "Linda is just putting supper on the table. I don't care what you put on, as long as it is clean. I spent an hour dressing you, and now see the result."

The four little Blossoms made haste to scurry into clean suits and dresses, and in a short time were ready to come downstairs and meet the minister and his wife properly.

"To-morrow morning," said Bobby, as Aunt Polly put out the light and kissed them good-night, "we must go and hunt for the raft."

But in the morning Peter Apgar rattled up to the door while they were still at the breakfast table, with Jerry and Terry harnessed to an empty wagon.

"Anybody here want to go over to the mill with me?" he called loudly.

Of course the four children were wild to go, and Aunt Polly said that she was sure Peter had room for every one.

"Take good care of them, Peter," she said, following them down to the gate.

"I will," promised Peter. "I've got an old quilt spread down in the bottom for them to sit on. If the jolting tires 'em two can sit up with me, taking turns."

Spotty wagged his tail as they drove off, but he would not follow the wagon. He knew it was his place to stay and take care of Aunt Polly.

The mill was about four miles from Brookside, and the children enjoyed the drive intensely. Good-natured Peter allowed each one

to "drive," holding the reins carefully as he told them, "Because," said Peter seriously, "even if you're only learning, you might as well begin right."

When they reached the mill, Jerry and Terry were tied to a post and Peter and the children went inside. Bobby was rather disappointed with the outside of the mill; he had expected it to look like the mills he saw in pictures, with great wide sails flattened against the sky.

"Electric power runs this mill," Peter explained when Bobby asked where the sails were. "You'll find plenty to see inside."

A short, stout man in a dusty white coat met them, and Peter gave him his order.

"I've some little folks from down the state a way with me," Peter told the man. "Guess you can show 'em round the mill a bit this morning?"

"I should say so!" was the hearty answer. "Come along, everybody, and we'll see just how grain is milled."

It was not a real flour mill. That is, not one of the great mills that turn millions of bushels

of wheat into flour; but it did grind buckwheat for the farmers and made coarse flour and feed for their stock, cracked corn for poultry and so on. The four little Blossoms saw much to interest them, but the great 'round stones that ground the grains and the arrangements for sifting the dust and chaff from the grain interested them the most.

"It must be fun to be a miller!" said Bobby, when they were ready to go and the noon whistle blew and the big stones stopped turning as the power was shut off. "Maybe when I grow up I'll run a mill."

Rattling home in the big wagon with two sacks of "middlings" in the back with them, Twaddles and Dot decided that they, too, would have a mill some day.

CHAPTER IX

LOST IN THE WOODS

RIGHT after dinner the four children started to hunt for the lost raft.

"It must have gone down the brook," argued Bobby, as they walked along. "Jud says things always float with the current. So we'll start on Mr. Simmond's land and walk slow."

They scrambled under the line fence, and Dot only tore one of the ruffles off her frock. They went on and on.

"We're almost to the woods," said Meg, as they dropped down under a ragged buttonwood tree to rest. "Where do you suppose the brook goes? Wouldn't it be fun to follow it through the woods and see what's on the other side!"

The four little Blossoms thought this would be great fun. They had not been in the woods yet, though Jud and Linda had promised to take them some day and Aunt Polly said it was the nicest kind of a place for picnics.

The children stood up, and shaded their eyes

with their hands. They could just see the eaves of the barn and the chimneys of Aunt Polly's house and the Apgar house. The brook twisted and turned so often, they had really walked further than they guessed.

"I'll bet it's dark in the woods," said Twaddles, marching ahead. "Maybe there's bears and things in there."

"Now don't begin and scare Dot," admonished Bobby. "Let's take hold of hands. My, isn't it nice and cool!"

They stepped from the sunny glare of the brook pasture into the cool, dark, rustly stillness of the beautiful woods. A chipmunk ran across their path, and tall ferns grew higher than their heads on either side of the brook.

Almost unconsciously the children left the brook and struck off into a pretty path that was laid with stepping stones and led up a slight hill. They saw two rabbits and heard gray squirrels chattering in the trees overhead. One squirrel came down and stared gravely at them.

"Isn't he pretty?" said Meg. "I wish he'd let me pat him."

A shriek from Dot startled them all.

"I saw a snake!" she cried, running to Meg. "A horrid, nasty little green one. And now I've lost my flowers!"

Sure enough, the bouquet she had been picking was scattered in all directions.

"Don't you care," Meg comforted her. "It was only a baby water snake. Aunt Polly told Mother that's the only kind that lives round here. Honestly, snakes are all right, Dot. Lots of people don't mind 'em a bit."

"Well, I do," said Dot decidedly. "They wiggle so. Let's go home anyway."

"I think we'd better," announced Bobby. "I don't know what time it is, but I guess there's no use looking for the raft any more."

"The raft?" echoed Meg. "Oh Bobby, where is the brook?"

Bobby grinned a little sheepishly.

"We forgot about the raft, didn't we?" he said. "Let's see—we came down that path—the brook must be over there. Come on, Dot, we're going home."

Dot sat down on the ground and began to cry.

"I don't want to be lost," she wailed. "I'm hungry, and my feet hurt! And I'm so tired!"

Meg put her arms around her sister.

"Don't cry," she urged her bravely. "We're not lost, are we, Bobby?"

Bobby and Meg, as the two older, felt that they must keep the twins from becoming discouraged.

"Course we're not lost," asserted Bobby stoutly.

"Course not," echoed Meg. "I think the brook is right past those three big trees. Come on, Dot, let's run and see who gets there first."

Dot allowed herself to be pulled to her feet.

"I'll count for you," said Bobby, glad to see her stop crying. "One—two—three—go!"

Away went Meg and Dot. Meg had intended to let Dot win, because she was so much smaller she couldn't be expected to run as well as her older sister. But Meg's good intentions came to nothing. Dot had an unfortunate habit of shutting her eyes tight when she ran, and the woods, of all places, are where it pays to keep one's eyes wide open. Poor Dot, running over

the uneven ground with her eyes closed, crashed headlong into a wild blackberry bush.

"Oh, ow!" she wailed shrilly. "Meg, Meg! Ow!"

Her face and hands were scratched and bleeding and her dress was badly torn by the time Meg and Bobby got her free from the prickly bush.

"I won't go," sobbed the unfortunate child, rubbing her smarting face. "I'll lie down in the grass and the birds can cover me with leaves. Nasty old woods!"

"But you'll have to come," urged Bobby. "I don't b'lieve it's much further, Dot. Come on."

"Then I'll take off my shoes and stockings," said Dot.

"Her feet are all puffed up," said Meg, unbuttoning the little tan shoes. "Poor sister! But you can't go barefoot through here—the stones and things are too sharp."

"They'll cut you," said Twaddles, who was watching anxiously.

"Let's make a chair with our hands and carry her," suggested Bobby.

So Meg and Bobby joined hands and managed to start off comfortably, carrying Dot.

Twaddles looked at them anxiously.

"It's getting dark," he quavered.

It was, too, a shadowy gray dusk there in the woods.

"I guess it's only 'cause there's so many trees," said Meg cheerfully. "It can't be dark out in the fields yet. I don't believe Jud has even started to milk."

They took up Dot again and went ahead, but it grew more and more difficult to follow the path.

"Here's where we were when you stopped to get your breath," declared Twaddles positively as they came into an open space. "I 'member that rotten log on the ground."

It was true. They had been walking in a circle!

"What's that?" cried Meg, starting up in sudden fright.

The twins clung to her, hiding their faces in her skirt.

"I saw something move—over there in those bushes," whispered Bobby.

"Is it—a—a bear?" asked Meg softly.

But Dot heard her.

"It's a bear!" she shrieked. "Twaddles, Meg, Bobby, come quick! It's a bear!"

Something bounded out of the bushes and leaped upon them with shrill, sharp barks.

"Spotty!" chorused the children. "You dear, darling old Spotty! Where did you come from?"

Spotty was apparently as glad to see them, and in his way tried to tell them so. He jumped up and down, barked excitedly and licked their hands and faces over and over.

"Say, I'll bet you Spotty knows the way home!" Bobby jumped to his feet as this thought came to him. "Spotty, show us the way home, that's a good dog. Home, Spotty!"

Spotty wagged his tail heartily and barked once. Then he rushed a little way ahead and turned to look at the children.

"Come on," he seemed to say.

"He does know," agreed Meg excitedly.

"Put your shoes on, Dot. 'All take hold of hands and hurry!"

They were in such haste they put the left shoe on Dot's right foot and the right one on her left, but she never even noticed it. Taking hold of hands, the four little Blossoms scurried through the dark woods, for it was pitch dark now, after Spotty. The dog kept just a little way ahead, and now and then he barked as if to tell them that everything was all right.

It was not easy walking in the dark, and they tripped and stumbled over tree roots and unsuspected stones. But at last they came out into the open. The stars were shining overhead, and it was night.

"Where are we?" asked Meg in wonder. "This isn't the brook pasture."

"I see the gate light!" cried Bobby suddenly.

CHAPTER X

THE BLOSSOMS GO BERRYING

SURE enough, ahead of them twinkled the pretty ornamental light that Aunt Polly had lighted on dark nights to show where the driveway went through the gates.

"We're in back of the house!" cried Meg. "See, that's the kitchen window where the white curtain is. Don't things look different at night?"

"Hello! Hello!" came Jud's clear call. "Bobby, Meg, is that you?"

Then as Bobby answered him, they heard Jud shouting:

"All right, folks, they've come. I told you they were all right."

Peter and Jud and a neighbor's boy came running toward the children, swinging lanterns, and followed by Mrs. Peter Apgar and Aunt Polly and Linda. Such a time as there was, and such a hugging and kissing and explaining!

"When you didn't come home to supper, I be-

gan to worry," said dear Aunt Polly, carrying Dot, big girl as she was. Peter had picked up Meg, and Jud had shouldered Twaddles, while Bobby kept running beside them.

"You must be starved," was Linda's greeting. "We've got fried chicken and currant jelly, too."

And though it was late, Aunt Polly was sure that fried chicken would hurt no one, and while the hungry Blossoms ate, she sat by and listened to what had happened to them in the woods.

"Why, darlings," she cried over and over, "Auntie will buy you other books and toys, but I couldn't possibly buy your mother other children if anything happened to you. Look at Dot's feet; the poor child must have walked miles. And her face and hands are terribly scratched."

Directly after supper the tired children were ready for bed, and Linda and Aunt Polly undressed them and bathed the sore little feet and put soothing cold cream on sunburned, scratched little faces.

The summer weeks flew merrily by, and when

a rainy afternoon came and Aunt Polly suggested that the children should write to their father and mother, the Blossoms discovered that they really had a good deal to tell.

"I'll begin, 'cause I'm the oldest and I can write in pencil," said Bobby. "Then Meg can print, and I'll write what Dot and Twaddles tell me to. I guess they will like that kind of letter."

Aunt Polly thought so, too, and she gave Bobby her own pretty mahogany "secretary" that was ever so old a desk, to write at.

Bobby put his tongue in his cheek and worked hard for fifteen minutes. Then he was ready to read aloud.

"'Dear Daddy and Mother:'" he read. "'We thought you would like to hear from us. Last week Peter was haying and Meg and I helped him make loads. Meg drove into the barn all by herself. It is fun to see them unload the hay, because they have a thing they call a hayfork that comes down and takes up big handfuls and carries it up to the mow. I can almost milk.

The twins are very good most of the time. Your loving son, Robert Hayward Blossom.'"

"Will they know that's from you?" asked Meg doubtfully, slipping into the chair at the desk and taking up the pencil to print her letter. "You never call yourself Robert."

"I guess I know how to write a letter," Bobby informed her with dignity. "You always sign your real names to letters, don't you, Aunt Polly?"

"Yes, indeed, dear," said Aunt Polly, who was doing something to a pair of overalls.

Meg printed slowly and carefully, and soon her letter was ready to be read aloud.

"'Dear Daddy and Mother,'" she began proudly. "'We hope you are well. We are. Dot most wasn't, but I took care of her. She went out to the barn to hunt for eggs, and the turkey gobbler saw her. He thought she was carrying corn in the basket. He chased her and she ran. I heard her crying and I ran down to the barn. She was backed up into a corner and he was making noises at her. He is awful big,

but I am not afraid of him. I grabbed the broom Jud keeps to sweep the barn floor with and I chased that old gobbler clear into the orchard. We are going to pick berries to-morrow.'"

The twins had kept still as long as they could, and now it was their turn.

"Tell Mother 'bout the snake I saw this morning," said Twaddles. "Jud says it was a black snake after baby robins. It was on the grape arbor where there is a robin's nest. Jud killed it."

"Tell Daddy I weeded a whole onion row for Aunt Polly," begged Dot.

"Wait a minute, I have to sign my name," interrupted Meg.

And she signed it, "Margaret Alice Blossom," right in among the words of the twins' letters that Bobby was patiently writing.

The next day was very warm, and Aunt Polly thought they had better play in the orchard instead of picking berries, so they trooped out soon after breakfast, to find the orchard cool and shady.

"I wish I had my book that was drowned," mourned Meg. "I love to sit up in a tree and read."

"Well, I loved Geraldine better than Tottie-Fay," said Dot, giving the old doll a shake as she spoke.

"No use fussing," advised the sensible Bobby. "They're lost, and we mustn't let Aunt Polly hear us, 'cause she'll think she ought to go right off and buy us some more. I'm going to climb this tree. Who wants a ripe apple?"

"I do," and Meg jumped up. "Let me hold my apron and you throw 'em down, Bobby. Twaddles, stop teasing Spotty."

"I aren't teasing him," declared Twaddles indignantly. "I'm going to teach him to carry bundles."

Twaddles' method of teaching the patient Spotty was to sit down on him with feet spread wide apart and wait for the dog to shake him off.

Dot sat down quietly in the grass and began to make a bouquet of wild-flowers. It was Dot who always helped Aunt Polly weed and water

her flower garden, and Dot who liked to see fresh flowers on the dining-room table.

When Meg had her apron full of apples she sat down near Dot, and the four ate as many sweet summer apples as four small people could who had eaten breakfast less than an hour before.

"There's Poots," said Meg suddenly, glancing up and seeing the black cat picking her way through the grass. "Do you suppose she is hunting birds?"

Poots blinked her green eyes innocently. If she were after birds, she had no intention of catching any before an audience. She sat down and began to wash her face.

A mischievous idea seized Twaddles.

"Rats, Spotty!" he shouted. "Rats!"

Now rats sounds pretty much like "cats," and the excited and startled Spotty did not stop to question which word Twaddles had used. He jumped up, his ears pointing forward.

"Rats, sic 'em!" said bad little Twaddles. "Rats, Spotty!"

Spotty barked twice sharply. Poots arose, her fur bristling. Spotty leaped at her, barking

playfully. Away ran Poots, her black tail sticking straight up in the air. And after them raced the four little Blossoms, shouting and calling frantically.

Poots ran straight for the front wall and scrambled up it, leaving Spotty to bark wildly on the ground and make futile rushes at the solid wall he couldn't hope to climb. Some of the masonry was loose, and Poots, digging with her sharp claws, sent down a shower of dust into the dog's eyes. He whined, and dug at his eyes with both forepaws. Then he sneezed several times.

"You will chase me, will you?" Poots seemed to say, gazing down at him from her safe position. "The idea!"

"Well, we might as well pick up some of this stuff," said Twaddles, knowing that the fun was over.

"It's cooler—just feel that breeze!" exclaimed Meg. "Let's ask Aunt Polly if we can't go berrying after dinner."

Aunt Polly obligingly said they could, and after dinner the four little Blossoms scrambled

into overalls Aunt Polly had bought and shortened to fit them.

"I wish your mother could see you," she said, as she gave them each a bright tin pail. "No need to worry about your dress now, is there, Dot?"

"Going berrying?" asked Jud, as they passed him, clipping the green hedge around the kitchen garden. "Better keep out of the sun."

The children walked down the road and turned into another field. They knew where the blackberry bushes grew, and they meant to fill their pails.

"Let's start here by this fence," suggested Bobby. "What's that over in Mr. Simmond's field?"

"It's a bull," answered Meg who knew all the animals at Brookside and on the neighboring farms by this time. "He's as cross as can be, but he took three prizes at the last Fair."

Twaddles ate the first dozen berries he picked and then he picked another dozen for Dot's pail. He decided that larger and better berries grew on the other side of the fence. He crawled un-

der and his shout of delight brought the others.

"You never saw such big ones!" cried Twaddles gleefully. "Meg, look!"

"They are big," agreed Meg. "Come on, Bobby, let's go on the other side. Mr. Simmonds won't care."

Dot was already under the fence, and Meg and Bobby stooped down and crawled under after her.

The four little figures in blue overalls began to pick industriously. The berries were thick and juicy, and the bottoms of the tin pails were covered in a few minutes. Meg had just stopped to pull a briar from her thumb when she heard a bellow behind her.

There stood the bull, in the middle of the field, his head down between his knees, his feet pawing the ground, and his angry eyes glaring at the berry pickers.

"Oh, Bobby! The bull!" gasped Meg. "Run, Dot and Twaddles!"

CHAPTER XI

THE HOME LAUNDRY

DOT and Twaddles took one frightened look at the bellowing bull, and then dropped flat on the ground and began to squirm under the fence.

"Hurry, Meg," urged Bobby. "Don't stand there like that! Run!"

"I'm waiting for you," quavered Meg.

"All right, hurry," repeated Bobby.

He and Meg crawled under the fence and stood beside Twaddles and Dot. Then they looked over at the bull. He was not charging directly toward them, but at something else his angry red eyes had seen even before the children noticed it. Further down there was a gap in the fence where several rails were broken.

Meg shrieked in terror as she saw what the bull meant to do.

"Peter! Jud! Aunt Polly! Come quick!" she screamed, hardly knowing what she was crying.

"Coming!" called a big voice, and over the fence corner sprang Peter Apgar, a pitchfork in his hand. He had been gathering up the loose hay left along the edge of the field after the hayloader had gathered the main crop.

After Peter came Spotty, who met the bull just as that cross animal's nose appeared at the gap in the fence. Indeed, Spotty met him so suddenly that both grunted.

"I'll turn him. You stay back here out of sight," commanded Peter, running past the four little Blossoms.

The children were very glad to stay huddled behind the bushes, but they couldn't help peeping out now and then to see what Peter and Spotty were doing with the bull.

"Woof, woof!" barked Spotty.

"You will, will you?" shouted Peter.

He jabbed the bull with the pitchfork, and that surprised beast turned with a bellow. Holding the pitchfork so that it would not hurt him unless he tried to come at him, Peter forced the bull back through the fence, and then he and Spotty drove him across the field.

Presently Peter and the dog came back, a bit warm and breathless, and very glad the four little Blossoms were to see them.

"You can finish berrying in peace," said Peter. "I drove the bull into Simmonds' barnyard and told his man to keep him there. No farmer has a right to leave a cross bull at large."

The children set to work at the berries again, and, as nothing further happened to disturb them, they filled all four pails before supper time. Bobby and Meg helped the twins a little, and maybe they weren't proud to have berries of their own picking and cream, as Meg said, of their own milking, for their supper that night! And there were enough berries left over for four small turnovers. Aunt Polly made this pleasant announcement.

"I intended to bake cookies to-morrow morning," she said, smiling. "And I don't know why I shouldn't make turnovers, too, and maybe doughnuts. Perhaps some one would like to keep me company? Linda is going to spend the day with her mother in town, and like as not I shall be lonesome."

"We'll all keep you company," promised Bobby gravely.

So the next morning every one was up early because Linda wanted to have breakfast cleared away before Jud drove her over to town. Soon after she was gone Aunt Polly put on a large white apron and the four children trooped into the pleasant kitchen after her.

"Let me see," thought Aunt Polly out loud. "Meg should have an apron. Suppose I tie one of Linda's around your neck, dear? Hers are shorter than mine."

In a very short time Aunt Polly had rolled out the crust for the turnovers and filled them with berries and sugar.

"When they are done you can take them outdoors and eat them while they're hot," she said. "Make believe you're having a picnic."

"Can't we have a picnic, a real picnic?" asked Bobby quickly.

"Why, of course," agreed Aunt Polly. "I meant you should have a picnic weeks ago. Only time goes so fast. However, before vaca-

tion is over we'll have a real picnic with all kinds of good things to eat."

Every one was very much interested in the first batch of cookies, and Aunt Polly gave each one a sample, which was pronounced delicious.

Then Aunt Polly put on her big kettle and started to fry some doughnuts.

Dot, when no one was looking, took Spotty out into the hall and gave him half a cookie. Then they both came back into the kitchen wearing such an innocent air that Aunt Polly had to laugh.

"Spotty has a sweet tooth, all right," she declared. "Don't let him tease all your cookies away from you, dear. Twaddles, look out!"

The warning came too late, for Twaddles, reaching across the bowl of freshly fried doughnuts to get something, caught his sleeve on the rim of the bowl and succeeded in turning the whole thing upside down over himself.

"I really think," said patient, long-suffering Aunt Polly, when the doughnuts had been picked up and brushed off and Twaddles had explained how it happened, "I really think, that

four children and a dog are too many to have in the kitchen on baking day. Anyway, the turnovers are done. I'll slip them on a plate and let Meg carry it out under the chestnut tree. Then you may have your picnic." And so it was settled.

"I wish," confided Meg, as she bit into a juicy bit of pie—Aunt Polly made wonderful berry pies—"I had my 'Black Beauty' book."

"I'll never have another doll like Geraldine!" sighed Dot. "Never! And what good are all her clothes? I haven't any doll to fit 'em."

"You might take a tuck in 'em for Totty-Fat," suggested Bobby, using the disrespectful name he had invented for Dot's old doll. "She's a sight. Oh dear! I wish I had tried to fly my airplane just once before I lost it."

"Well, there's my bird," mourned Twaddles. "Aunt Polly never heard it sing. And now she never will."

"I dripped a little juice on my dress," announced Dot doubtfully, after Meg had gone in to help her aunt wash dishes.

"I should think you had," said Bobby, gazing

severely at the little girl. "I don't believe blackberry juice comes out, either. Prob'ly that dress will always be spotted now."

"Linda said when she was a little girl her mother made her wash her own dresses if she got too many dirty in one day," Dot declared. "Maybe I could wash this."

Twaddles and Bobby hadn't a very clear idea of how to wash a dress, and because it was something they had not done before, the idea appealed to them.

"We'll help you," offered Bobby generously. "I saw a piece of soap out at the barn this morning. And the rain barrel's full. Come on."

They trotted down to the barn. Neither Peter nor Jud was anywhere in sight, which was just what the washers hoped for. Of course, they argued, it wasn't naughty to wash a dress, but you never can tell what objections grown-ups are going to make. Sometimes they find fault with every single thing one wants to do.

"Let me rub the soap on," begged Dot, as Bobby unbuttoned her frock for her and she

stepped out of it, a sturdy little figure in a brief white petticoat.

So Dot rubbed plenty of soap on the blackberry spots. It was harness soap, which Jud had been using for the leather harness, but the children thought it made a fine lather. Linda would have scolded had she seen them, for soap sets fruit juice stains so that it is almost impossible ever to get them out.

"Let's put in our handkerchiefs, too," suggested Bobby, pulling out a grimy square.

Twaddles had lost his, and Dot's was in the pocket of her dress and already wet, but Bobby added his to the wash.

"We must let 'em soak," advised Dot, who had been in the kitchen on wash days. "Linda says that gets the dirt out."

The three children balanced themselves on the edge of the rain barrel while they waited for their wash to soak.

"Well, for pity's sake, what are you up to now?" It was Jud's voice, and Jud came out of the barn so unexpectedly that he made them jump.

Twaddles tumbled to his knees, and Bobby stood up, but poor Dot lost her shaky balance and fell into the barrel with her dress and the handkerchief.

"There, there, sister, you're not hurt," soothed Jud, as he pulled the dripping child out and stood her on the grass. "For mercy's sake don't yell like that. Miss Polly will think you're killed!"

Dot was frightened and wet, and she had no intention of smiling at such misfortune. She cried so loud that Aunt Polly heard her and came running down to the barn, Meg running behind her.

"Why, Baby!" Aunt Polly was surprised to see streams of water running off her small niece, and at first she did not notice that Dot had no dress on.

"Where's your dress?" demanded Meg.

Aunt Polly picked up Dot, wet as she was, and started back to the house. Meg followed to help find clean dry clothes.

Jud looked at Twaddles and Bobby queerly. "Just what were you doing?" he asked in a dif-

ferent voice than they had ever heard from easy-going, good-natured Jud. "What's that in the barrel?"

"We were helping Dot," said Bobby. "She got juice all on her dress, and, honest, she's worn eleven this week. So we thought we ought to wash this one."

"I see," replied Jud slowly. "Do you know you've spoiled a barrel of soft rain water that's worth considerable? To say nothing of soap."

"We used the green soap we found on the beam," put in Twaddles.

"You perfect imps!" groaned poor Jud. "That's my harness soap. I don't see how your town gets along with all four of you the year around. Well, you can just help me bail out this water—that's flat. Wring out that pesky wash and spread it on the grass to dry. Then each of you take one of those lard pails, and set to work."

CHAPTER XII

UP ON THE MOUNTAIN

TWO subdued little boys went in to dinner that noon. Afterward Aunt Polly announced that she was going over to town.

"I have to drive Nelly Bly," she told them, "and as I couldn't take but one, I don't think it is fair to take any of you. As soon as the car is fixed, we'll have a long drive."

Jud had taken the automobile over to the one garage the week before and it was not ready yet.

"Now try to amuse yourselves and don't get into mischief," cautioned Aunt Polly, as Jud brought Nelly Bly and the buggy to the door. "I'm sorry I have to leave you when Linda is away, but you'll be all right. Jud will be within call, and I'll be back about five. I'm going to pick up Linda and bring her back."

"What are you going to do, Jud?" asked Dot, as Aunt Polly drove out of the gate. Dot was in a clean dry dress and none the worse for her ducking.

"Can't we help you?" asked Meg kindly.

"Now look here," Jud said, in his pleasant, slow voice. "I'm going to be all-fired busy in the back garden. If anything frightens you, sing out and I'll hear you. If you want to talk to any one, go down to the house, and Mother will listen to you. But please don't bother me."

"But what'll we do?" persisted Bobby.

Jud pointed to the tent that had been Father Blossom's surprise.

"Play Indians, why don't you?" he suggested. "Don't believe you've had those clothes on three times since you got 'em. If any one had sent me a tent when I was a kid, you couldn't have kept me from playing with it."

"We might as well play Indian," said Meg, when Jud had gone off to his garden, whistling. "Dot and I'll put on our suits and you and Twaddles wear yours. I wish I had a tomahawk."

"Girl Indians don't have 'em," said Bobby flatly.

"Well, they ought to," declared Meg. "Doesn't Dot look cunning in her suit?"

"Heap big Injun chief," announced Bobby, prancing about in his suit.

"Let's get captives and hide them in the tent," suggested Meg, who usually did most of the planning for their games.

"Where'll we get 'em?" asked Bobby doubtfully. "Jud's bigger than we are."

"No, we can't capture Jud," agreed Meg.

"Wow! wow! Whoop!" shouted Twaddles, tumbling down the steps and giving his best Indian yell as he came.

"Ducks and chickens might be captives," said Meg slowly, frowning at the interruption of Twaddles.

Ordinarily Meg was a good little girl and not given to mischief, but a spice of naughtiness seemed to be in all the four little Blossoms on this unfortunate day.

"Let's get the ducks, first," said Bobby. "That's a great idea, Meg. Come on, Twaddles, we have to capture the ducks."

They found the beautiful white birds swimming lazily about the artificial duck pond in the chicken yard, and they didn't seem to want to

be captured at all. The children finally succeeded in driving them, twenty of them, that is, into the tent.

"Somebody will have to stay and see they don't come out when we get the chickens," said Meg. "Dot's too little—she'll let 'em out. I'll do it, if you'll stay when we get the chickens in, and let me capture the turkeys, Bobby."

Bobby assented, and Meg stayed behind at the tent while Dot, Twaddles and Bobby went after the chickens.

If you have ever tried to drive a hen into a certain place, you will know how very stupid she can be. The children were hot and cross before they had twenty-eight white leghorn hens penned in the tent with the ducks.

"They make an awful lot of noise," said Bobby nervously. "Jud will hear them."

"As soon as they find it's dark they'll think it's night," answered Meg comfortably. "Now I'm going after turkeys."

But the only turkey she could find was the lame one that lived in the chicken yard and was tame enough to allow herself to be picked up.

"Aren't they good and quiet?" said Meg with satisfaction, as she poked the patient turkey hen through the tent flaps and heard the soft mutterings of the ducks and hens, who thought it was night and time to go to sleep.

Just as the Indians had the last captive snugly fastened in, Peter, with Terry harnessed to the "market wagon," a light wagon that was used to take the butter and eggs over to town in, came down the drive from the barn.

"Whoa!" said Peter to Terry.

"Oh, Mr. Peter!" The four little Blossoms rushed out to greet him. "Where are you going? Can't we go? Where's Jerry?"

Peter surveyed the four Indians gravely.

"Well, as I'm going up in the mountain, I guess we won't meet any one who'll be scared to death," he said slowly. "So I don't know but perhaps you might hop in. Jerry? I left him in the stable. This wagon goes with one horse."

As the children scrambled in, Peter thought of something.

"Like as not Miss Polly'll be back before we

are," he observed. "She might miss all four of you if no one's about. Jud!"

"Here!" shouted Jud from the back garden. He came to the gate in the hedge.

"Jud, if Miss Polly comes home and doesn't find any children, just tell her they're with me and that we'll be home by six. I'm going up in the mountain."

"All right," said Jud.

"How do you go up in the mountain?" inquired Meg curiously, as they turned into the road.

She was sitting on the front seat with Peter, Twaddles was between them, and Dot was in her lap. Bobby stood up in the wagon behind them and looked over their shoulders.

"I guess I mean up on the mountain," Peter corrected himself. "We've got kind of a habit round here of saying 'in the mountain.' Ever been up there?"

The four little Blossoms had never been there —indeed they did not know there was a mountain near by.

"Well, I suppose it's more of a hill," admit-

ted Peter. "But it's the best mountain we have. Queer people live up there. They don't see much of anybody, and some of 'em's as timid as deer. The children, now, run when they see a stranger coming."

"What are we going to get?" asked Bobby. He had been long enough on the farm to know that when one harnessed up a horse and wagon there was usually something to be fetched or carried.

"I'm going up to see if I can't get a woman to come down next week and help Mrs. Peter do some cleaning," explained Peter. "Help's scarce in the town, and some of the mountain-folk like to earn a little money in the summer. Miss Polly taking the buggy, I had to get along with the market wagon. 'Sides, the thought came to me that I might meet some one who wanted a ride."

Meg saw Peter's eyes twinkling and she guessed that he had meant to ask them to go with him all the time.

Terry was going up a steep road now, narrow as well as steep, and the untrimmed trees lashed

against the curtained sides of the wagon as it passed.

"Here's Mrs. Cook's house," said Peter at last.

The children saw a little unpainted house standing in a clearing of half-chopped tree-stumps. A line of washing was strung between the two posts that supported a narrow roof over the door. Skins of animals were tacked on the sides of the house, and a large hound dog chained to a tree watched them closely.

"Can we get out and see the dog?" asked Meg, as Peter tied Terry to a convenient tree.

"I don't know as I'd touch the dog," said Peter. "Better keep away from him. He's a night hunter, and may be cross. There's Mrs. Cook's little girl—go and make friends with her if you want to."

Peter went up to the house door and knocked, and Meg walked over to a little girl seated on a tree stump.

The child was barefooted and wore a ragged dress, but her skin was a beautiful clear brown and her eyes were as blue as Meg's. She had lovely long brown hair, too.

"Hello!" said Meg.

Apparently the little girl had not heard her coming, for she jumped when Meg spoke and turned swiftly. Then she shrieked loudly and dashed for the house. Peter came out at once.

"Guess you frightened her," he said. "And Christopher Columbus, I don't wonder. You look like a band of Indians let loose."

"My! we forgot these clothes," said Bobby. "Meg didn't mean to frighten her. Look at Twaddles—she scared him pretty near stiff yelling like that."

Mrs. Cook came out to the wagon presently, to tell Peter that she would come the next week. She was a little thin, brown-faced woman, and she was even shyer than Dot, who usually shrank out of sight when there were any strangers around.

"These Miss Polly's 'lations?" asked Mrs. Cook, twisting her apron nervously.

CHAPTER XIII

LINDA IS UNHAPPY

EVERY one of 'em," announced Peter. "These, ma'am, are the four little Blossoms!"

"We didn't mean to scare your little girl," said Meg bravely. "I guess she thought we were Indians. These are just play clothes."

"Emma Louise scares easy," said Mrs. Cook. "All my children do."

"How many have you?" asked Twaddles, meaning to be polite.

"Nine," replied Mrs. Cook serenely. "Four boys and five girls."

"We have to be going, if we get back in time for supper," hinted Peter, gathering up the reins. "I'll tell the Missus you'll walk down Tuesday morning, then, and I'll drive you home at night."

"Wait a minute," begged Dot, as Peter was about to turn Terry. It was the first word she

had spoken since they had reached the Cook house. "Give these to the little girl."

It was the chain of gay-colored beads Dot wore around her neck with the Indian dress, and Mrs. Cook's face wrinkled into a smile of delight.

"Emma Louise will love 'em," she declared brightly. "I'm much obliged."

Dot was too shy to say anything, but she blushed and smiled and inwardly wished that Peter would drive on. Soon they were going down the mountain again.

"Aunt Polly's at home!" shouted Dot, as they turned into the drive and she saw a white figure rocking in the porch swing.

Aunt Polly was very glad to see them, and she had not been worried because Jud had told her where the children had gone. The milking was done, she said, and everything fed, so if they would get washed and dressed right away for supper, Linda would put it on the table while they were upstairs.

"Linda looked as if she'd been crying," said Meg, slipping off the Indian dress and pulling

on a clean white piqué. "Her eyes were all red."

"Maybe she was bad and her mother scolded her," said Dot.

At the supper table Aunt Polly listened to the story of the afternoon's drive, and heard about Mrs. Cook and the queer little house, but all the time she seemed to be thinking of something else. And there was certainly something seriously wrong with Linda. She scarcely ate any supper, and her eyes were red, as Meg said. Twaddles was sure she had the toothache. When he went out into the kitchen after supper he found her crying over the dishes, and she was cross to him and told him to get out of her kitchen.

"I guess Linda has the measles," reported the astonished Twaddles to the rest of the family, who were on the front porch.

"Yes, I guess she's sick," remarked Bobby. "She didn't want any cold chicken."

"Was she bad, Aunt Polly?" questioned Dot. "Did her mother punish her?"

"Well, Linda and I had decided not to bother

you with our troubles," said Aunt Polly, "but I see we can't hide a thing from your sharp eyes. I have bad news to tell you. While you were away with Peter this afternoon, and while Linda and I were in town, a miserable chicken thief got into the chicken yard and stole ever so many chickens. We don't know yet how many. And they took nearly every one of Linda's ducks. She has the ducks for her own, you know, and she uses the money for her school clothes. So that's why she's crying."

The four little Blossoms sat and stared at Aunt Polly. They had completely forgotten the chickens and ducks and the one lame turkey shut into the tent till this minute.

"Aunt Polly!" gasped Meg, in a very little voice. "Aunt Polly—please, we were just playing, and—and——" Meg could not go on.

"We were playing Indians," said Bobby, coming to the rescue of his sister, "and we had to have some captives. So—so——"

"We took the chickens and the ducks," went on the twins in concert.

"And the lame turkey," put in Meg.

"And shut them in our tent!" finished Bobby and Meg together.

"Put them in your tent?" repeated Aunt Polly. "Do you suppose they are there now?"

Away dashed the children, Aunt Polly after them, around to the side lawn. The tent was just as they had left it, and Meg cautiously unbuttoned the flap. A soft, comfortable little singing sound came out to them.

"Well, I never!" said Aunt Polly helplessly. "What won't you children do next!"

The four little Blossoms ran back to tell Linda that her ducks were safe, and you may be sure she was very glad to hear it. And in the morning they found the biddies and the ducks none the worse for their night in the tent.

Shortly after this, Bobby and Meg were awakened one night by a queer noise outside. Bobby heard it first and came creeping into Meg's room to see if she were awake.

"Meg! Meg!" he whispered, so as not to wake Dot. "Did you hear something?"

"Yes, I did," whispered back Meg. "Under

my window. Wait a minute and we'll peep out."

Dot and Twaddles wouldn't wake up, "not if there was an earthquake," Daddy Blossom sometimes said, but Meg and Bobby were light sleepers and very apt to hear any unusual noise.

Together now they crept over to Meg's window and, raising the screen very softly, peeped out. Something large and dark was moving about on the lawn below.

"I guess it's Mr. Simmonds' bull," suggested Meg.

"Don't you think we ought to go down and drive him off?" asked Bobby, quite as if driving bulls off his aunt's lawn was a nightly task with him. "Or I'll go alone—I'm the man of the house."

As a matter of fact, he was. Aunt Polly and Linda slept in rooms across the hall at the back of the house, and apparently had heard nothing. But Meg had no idea of letting her brother face a bull alone.

"I'm coming, too," she whispered. "Let's put on our shoes—you know how wet the grass is at

night. And here's a blanket, so you won't catch cold."

Wrapping herself in another blanket—Aunt Polly kept two light-weight blankets folded at the foot of each bed for chilly nights—Meg tiptoed carefully downstairs after Bobby. They knew their way about the house now, even in the dark. The front door was not locked, for people in the country seldom lock their doors.

"Why, Bobby!" Meg called softly. "Look! There's a lot of 'em! See! All down the drive! They can't be Mr. Simmonds' bull——"

"Well, not all of 'em," snickered Bobby. "There's only one of him. Come on, Meg, I'm going up to one and see what it is."

"Why, it's a calf!" cried Meg, in astonishment. "A darling baby calf! They all are! How many are there, Bobby?"

"I can count fourteen," said Bobby after a moment, for the night was not pitch black, but one of those soft summer nights with so many stars that after your eyes are accustomed to it you can see objects distinctly enough to count.

"Somebody's left their barnyard gate open,"

announced Meg. "What'll we do? Drive 'em into our barnyard?"

"Sure!" answered Bobby, just like a farmer. "That'll keep 'em safe till morning. And then Jud will find out whose they are."

Driving those fourteen baby calves was not such hard work as they had expected, for they were very amiable beasties and only wanted to nibble a little fresh sweet grass as they were driven on toward the barnyard. But Meg and Bobby had so much fun doing this that they forgot to be quiet, and just as they had the last calf safely inside and the big gate barred, two figures came running up to them.

"For the love of Pete!" said Jud, breathing heavily. "Meg and Bobby! And in their night clothes! Are you crazy?"

"There's fourteen baby calves in there," announced Bobby with dignity.

"Yes, and they would have had the whole lawn eaten up if it hadn't been for us," declared Meg.

Peter and Jud peered over the gate.

"Those are Tom Sparks' calves he bought for

his auction next week," said Peter. "Guess he didn't pen 'em in good to-night. Well, you youngsters don't miss anything, do you? You run back to bed now, and in the morning we'll do a little telephoning."

And when Jud came up while they were at breakfast the next morning and told them that Mr. Sparks wanted to pay a reward of five dollars to the person who had saved his calves for him, maybe there wasn't great excitement!

Aunt Polly then heard the story for the first time, as did Dot and Twaddles and Linda.

"You take it," advised Linda, when Jud repeated the offer of the reward. "If the constable had put his calves in the pound it would have cost him twice that to get them out."

"But I don't like to have them take money," protested Aunt Polly.

"All right," said Jud suddenly. "Mr. Sparks can pay them back some other way."

CHAPTER XIV

THE PICNIC

JUD went off whistling, and soon after they had finished breakfast the four little Blossoms saw a tall, stout man drive in. His horse was a beautiful, shiny black animal, evidently groomed and tended with great care.

"That's Mr. Sparks," Linda informed the children.

The children ran out to see the calves being herded together, and Jud embarrassed Meg and Bobby very much by introducing them as the little people who had heard the calves in the night and gone downstairs after them.

"Meg heard 'em," said Bobby modestly.

"Well, well, well!" almost shouted Mr. Sparks, though that was his natural way of talking; he couldn't speak low. "I do certainly admire a girl with spunk enough to get up in the middle of the night and chase live-stock. You ought to be a farmer's daughter."

He paused and smiled at the children. It

was impossible not to like this bluff, red-faced man with the loud voice.

"I had intended to give a little reward to the person who did me this service," went on Mr. Sparks. "Finding there's two of 'em, rightly I should double it. But Mrs. Hayward, I hear, doesn't want you to take money—good notion, too, in a way, I guess. Suppose I give you one of these little calves now. How would that do?"

"One of those darling little calves?" cried Meg.

"To keep?" echoed Bobby.

"To keep, of course," assented Mr. Sparks. "You pick the critter you want, and I guess Mrs. Hayward will pasture it for you."

"Sure she will," promised Jud, who was standing by with a delighted smile. "And after you go back to Oak Hill, I'll take good care of it and next summer you can come up and see your own cow."

Aunt Polly and Linda and Peter all had to be summoned, and then, with every one's help and advice, not forgetting the twins', Bobby and

Meg selected a handsome cream-colored little calf that Mr. Sparks assured them would grow into a Jersey bossy cow like Mrs. Sally Sweet.

"What you going to call her?" he asked curiously.

Bobby looked at Meg.

"You name her," he suggested.

"All right. Let's call her Carlotta," said Meg promptly. "I think that is the loveliest name." So Carlotta the calf was named.

Carlotta did not seem to mind at all when her friends and relatives were driven off by Mr. Sparks. Apparently she liked Brookside farm and was glad she was going to live there.

"Thank you ever so much, Mr. Sparks," said Meg and Bobby for the twentieth time, as he drove out of the gateway after his recovered property.

A day or two after the finding of the calves Aunt Polly came out on the porch where the children were cutting up an old fashion magazine for paper dolls, and sat down in the porch swing with her mending basket.

"Do you know, honeys," she began, "if we

don't have our picnic pretty soon, vacation is going to be over. Though what I am to do this long cold winter without any children in my house I don't see."

"Bobby and I have to go to school," said Meg. "But Dot and Twaddles could stay."

"We're going to school, too," declared Dot, with such a positive snap of her blunt scissors that she snipped off a paper doll's head.

"Of course," affirmed Twaddles, with maddening serenity.

"Well, I think we'd better talk about the picnic," interposed Aunt Polly. "When to have it, and whom to invite and what to have to eat."

"Sandwiches!" cried Meg, answering the last question first. "Let me help make 'em, Auntie?"

"Oh, of course," promised Aunt Polly. "And it seems to me that we had better go to-morrow. This spell of fine dry weather can't last forever, and when the rain does come we may have a week of it."

"Can Jud come?" asked Bobby.

"Yes, indeed," answered Aunt Polly, who had

the happiest way of saying "yes" to nearly everything her nephews and nieces asked of her.

"And Linda?" asked Twaddles.

"Linda, too," agreed Aunt Polly.

"Where'll we go?" demanded the practical Dot.

"Over in the woods," said Aunt Polly.

"Let's get ready," proposed Meg, who knew a picnic meant work beforehand.

Every one scattered, Meg and Aunt Polly to the kitchen to help Linda pack the lunch boxes, as far as they could be packed the day before the picnic; Bobby to tell Jud that he was expected; and Dot and Twaddles on an errand of their own.

They were gone some time, and when they returned acted so mysteriously that Meg was quite out of patience.

"Be sure you have enough sandwiches," advised Twaddles, swinging on the kitchen screen door, a thing which always made Linda nervous.

"There might somebody come at the last minute," chimed in Dot.

Then she and Twaddles giggled.

"Those silly children," said Meg with her most grown-up air. "I suppose they think they sound funny."

Dot and Twaddles apparently did not care how they sounded, and they stayed in the kitchen, stirring and tasting, till Linda flatly declared that she'd put pepper in the pressed chicken instead of salt if they didn't stop bothering her. Jud came just at that moment and asked the twins to help him see if the new catch on the chicken yard gate worked all right, and the two little torments readily followed him.

Nearly everything was ready for the picnic by that night, and every one went to bed hoping for a clear day.

"The sun is shining, Meg! Meg, get up!" shouted Dot early the next morning. "We're going on a picnic!"

She made so much noise that she woke up Aunt Polly and Linda, as well as Bobby and Twaddles, and then, of course, there was nothing to do but to get up and have breakfast.

The four little Blossoms found Peter and Jud busy in the barn, putting clean straw in the bot-

tom of the box wagon that was used to haul logs and brushwood in in the winter.

"Be ready in two jerks of a lamb's tail," announced Peter, using one of his favorite expressions.

When the heavy wagon rattled up to the front door, the four little Blossoms were already sitting on the straw. Aunt Polly and Linda were helped in by Jud, who also lifted in the boxes of lunch, and then Peter clucked to Jerry and Terry, and away they went, over the meadow into the woods, and up the narrow wagon road.

"See, isn't this pretty?" asked Aunt Polly, as the road suddenly came out into a clearing, and they saw the brook a bit ahead of them.

They all jumped out, and Peter turned the horses' heads toward home at once. He was anxious to get back to his work, but was coming for them at half-past four.

"We must get some flowers for the table," said Aunt Polly, after she had helped Linda put the boxes in a low branch of a tree where nothing could touch them. "Come, children, let's get a bouquet of flowers."

They gathered wild flowers, and also found some late blackberries which, placed on a wide green leaf as a dish, looked very pretty. Linda spread a white cloth presently, and was opening the boxes when the sound of a rattling wagon attracted her attention.

"If that doesn't sound like Mr. Sparks' old rig," said Linda curiously.

"It is," announced Dot complacently. "Twaddles and me asked him to come to the picnic, 'cause he gave Meg and Bobby the calf."

Although Aunt Polly murmured helplessly, "what will those children do next!" they were all very glad to see Mr. Sparks when he finally rattled up. And there was plenty of everything to eat—trust Aunt Polly and Linda for that.

Mr. Sparks brought a freezer of ice-cream with him, which his wife had made, as his contribution to the picnic, and though he had to go as soon as lunch was over, he assured the children that he had had a splendid time.

When the crumbs were all scattered for the birds, and the papers and boxes neatly buried, except one box of sandwiches they had not eaten

and which they saved for Peter, Aunt Polly declared that she wanted to sit quietly for an hour and knit. Linda, too, had her embroidery, but the four little Blossoms wanted to go wading.

"I'll watch 'em," promised Jud.

So Meg and Bobby and Dot and Twaddles took off their shoes and stockings and pattered over the pine needles that covered the grass down to the edge of the brook.

Bobby dipped one foot in to test the water.

"Wow, it's cold!" he said. "Just like ice, Jud."

"You won't mind it after you've been in a little while," Jud assured him. "Now when I say come out, you're to come. No teasing to stay in! Is that agreed?"

"All right," promised the four little Blossoms. "Oh, ow! isn't it cold?"

CHAPTER XV

WHAT MEG FOUND

THE first thing Dot did was to step in a deep hole and get her dress and tucked-up skirt wet nearly to her shoulders.

"It's all right," said Meg calmly. "Aunt Polly brought some dry things with her. I guess she expected Dot to go in bathing instead of wading."

This made Dot very indignant, but she pattered along after the others, and in a few minutes forgot to be cross. When you are wading in a clear, cold brook with little dancing leaves making checkered patterns on the water, and a green forest all around you, you can not stay cross long.

"I see something," said Bobby suddenly. "Look! Over there where it's wide! Don't you see it, Meg?"

"Looks like clothes," said Meg, shading her eyes with her hand, for the sun on the water dazzled her. "Maybe it's a wash. Aunt Polly said

some of the hired men around here wash their clothes in the brook. Let's go and see."

"Here, here! Where are you going?" called Jud, as they began to scramble down.

"We saw something on the other side of the brook," explained Bobby. "We're going over to see what it is."

"Well, you just wait," ordered Jud. "That's the widest part of the brook down there, and all that side is swampy land. You can't land on it. You'll sink in. Wait till I take my shoes off, and I'll come and help you."

Jud took off his shoes and socks and rolled his trousers up to his knees. He wasn't afraid that the four little Blossoms would drown, for the brook was not very deep in any part. But it was wide at the point where Bobby wanted to cross, and there was no bank, only a piece of swamp, on the other side.

"Now I'll take Dot and Twaddles, and you and Meg hold hands," said Jud, as he stepped into the water. "Come on, Pirates, let's board yonder frigate."

The children giggled and stepped gingerly

after Jud. They were glad he had come with them, for the mild little brook looked like a river to them as they got out into the middle of it.

"What do you suppose that is over there?" said Bobby. "I wish it was buried treasure. I never found any buried treasure."

"Maybe it is Indians," Meg suggested a little fearfully.

"With a flag of truce?" said Jud, understanding at once. "Well, Meg, I don't believe we have any Indians around here."

He made a dive for Dot and saved her from slipping, but she wasn't a bit grateful.

"I almost caught a crab," she sputtered.

Before Bobby could tell her that crabs didn't live in brooks, they had reached the piece of swamp land and all four children rushed for the fluttering bit of white which had attracted Bobby's attention.

"Why, it's a shirt!" said Twaddles in great disappointment.

Whatever he had expected to see, it certainly

wasn't a shirt and he felt cheated. Jud had to laugh at the queer expression on his face.

Meg, however, did not laugh. She was eyeing the shirt closely and Jud saw that she had something on her mind. Perhaps Meg was his favorite among the children, if he had a favorite. He had once told Linda that Meg was a "regular little woman" and indeed, quiet as she was, she often saw things that other people did not notice.

"Jud," she said now, "that shirt hasn't any buttons on it and the pocket is ripped. And Linda brought her sewing basket."

Bobby looked at his little sister as though he thought she was losing her mind.

"What's a sewing basket got to do with it?" he demanded.

"It needs mending," said Meg soberly. "Maybe the man who washed it hasn't any needle and thread."

The twins declared that everyone had needle and thread, but Jud rather spoiled their argument by announcing that he had none.

"I can't sew, so what good would needle and thread do me?" he asked them.

Meg, forgetting the shirt for a moment, asked him what he did when buttons came off his clothes.

"My mother sews them on again," said Jud, "and Mother darns my socks and Mother mends the rips I get in my coats."

"There, you see!" Meg cried triumphantly. "This man hasn't any mother to sew buttons on him."

"On his shirt, you mean," giggled Dot.

"Well, maybe he hasn't," Bobby admitted. "I don't suppose he has, or he wouldn't have to do his own washing. But Linda's basket is on the other side of the brook."

"I'm going to take the shirt over to her and ask her to mend it," announced Meg. "I know she will. Then I'll bring it back and hang it on the bush and won't he be surprised!"

Jud chuckled.

"He'll be more surprised if he comes along and his shirt is missing," he laughed. "Why, he'll think the birds made way with it."

This was a new problem for Meg and she thought about it for several minutes.

"Dot and Twaddles can stay here," she decided, "and if the man comes, they can tell him that I will bring his shirt back as soon as it is mended."

But the twins did not take kindly to the idea of being left alone. They said they were going back when Jud went.

"Then you take the shirt, and I'll stay," said Meg, who seldom gave up a plan, once she had made it. "Please ask Linda to put the buttons on and mend the pocket and then you bring it right back."

Jud looked doubtful at the thought of leaving Meg, even when Bobby declared he would stay with her.

"I have to go, for the children can't get back alone," he said, "but you mustn't go away from here: I want to be able to find you when I bring the laundry home."

Bobby and Meg laughed and promised to stay close to the bush. Meg folded up the shirt and stuffed it in Jud's pocket, because she said

Dot would drop it in the water if she tried to carry it and Twaddles would want to play with it and might get it dirty. Then Meg and Bobby watched the three wade back and when they reached the opposite bank, they waved to them.

Though Jud had said they could not land, there was a narrow strip of ground firm enough to hold them and it was on this the bush grew where the unknown man had hung his washing.

"I don't see any house for him to live in," said Bobby curiously.

"Maybe he lives in a tent," Meg answered absently, trying to see across the brook to the tree where she knew Linda was sitting.

"Let's walk down a little way," suggested Bobby. "We'll come right back: Jud didn't say we couldn't go wading. He only said to be here when he came. Maybe we'll find the man's house."

Meg was willing enough, for she was no more fond of sitting still than Bobby was. Holding hands, they began cautiously to wade down stream.

The water rushed more swiftly than they ac-

tually liked, but neither would say so. Instead they slipped over the stones and tried to walk as fast as the water, and presently Meg had to stop to get her breath.

"I hear a kitty crying," she said the next minute. "Listen, Bobby—don't you hear a cat?"

But as noises often do, as soon as Bobby listened intently, the noise stopped. He couldn't hear a thing and said so.

"There! *Now* don't you hear it?" cried Meg. "It's a little kitty and it must be lost. Oh, Bobby, we have to find it!"

Bobby could hear the kitten mewing now and he was as eager to find it as Meg was. But how could a kitten be in the brook?

"It's back there!" Meg said, waving her hand toward the marshy land. "Maybe, if we call it, it will come."

And together they called, "Kitty! Kitty! Kitty!" but the little faint "Meow" sounded just the same.

"Well, I'll have to hunt for it," declared Bobby, looking at the wet and soggy ground

rather regretfully. "I hope there aren't any snakes in there," he added gloomily.

Meg had a horror of snakes and she didn't want her dearly loved brother to go where they might be. Neither could she go away and leave the kitten. So, like the brave and affectionate little girl she was, she said she was going with Bobby.

They hoped with all their hearts they wouldn't see a snake and they didn't know what they would do if they did, but they had no intention of leaving that forlorn kitty cat to its own fate. And, as sometimes happens, it turned out that they did not have to go where they dreaded to go at all.

"I see it!" cried Meg suddenly, her sharp eyes having searched the bank near them, where it jutted out into the water. "Look, Bobby, in that crooked tree, hanging out over the brook."

Bobby looked. At the very tip end of the longest branch, there clung a tiny ball of dirty white which must be the kitten.

"Scared to death," commented Bobby. "I don't see how we can get it down: the more

I shake the tree, the harder it will dig its claws in. That's the way cats do."

But Meg was ready with a plan.

"You climb up the tree," she told Bobby, "and I'll stand underneath and hold my skirts out; you can pull the cat off and drop it down into my lap."

That was easier said than done, as they both discovered the next minute. For one thing, the water sucked past the tree in a current that forced Meg to brace her feet wide apart to keep her balance. And when Bobby had climbed the tree, he found the limb wasn't strong enough to bear his weight and he couldn't crawl out to the cat.

"If I had a pole, I could push her off," he shouted to Meg.

"Bend it down," she called. "Bend the branch down and I'll pick her off, Bobby."

And, after one or two unsuccessful attempts to bend the branch down, that was just what they did do. Bobby managed to bend it within arm's reach of Meg, who detached the little cat much as you pick a caterpillar off a leaf. Though

the cat stuck tighter to the branch than any caterpillar was ever known to do.

"You're all right," said Meg soothingly, putting the kitten in her dress and gathering it up like a bag. "Soon as you get home, you can have something to eat and you'll feel much better."

It was hard work, wading against the current, but they helped each other and by good luck reached the bush, just as they saw Jud starting out from the other side. Dot and Twaddles danced impatiently on the bank, but he had evidently told them to stay there, for they did not follow him.

"Jud! Jud!" called Bobby and Meg, beginning to do a dance of their own. "You don't know what we found, Jud!"

"If I was you, I'd wait to do my prancing on dry ground," Jud advised them as he waded across. "It's safer and drier."

"Did Linda do the shirt? Is it mended?" Meg asked eagerly, when Jud was within easy talking distance.

"Mended tip-top," announced Jud. "Buttons

all on, pocket sewed back, rip between the shoulders all fixed. Never saw a neater job."

"Linda is good as she can be," Meg said gratefully, holding her skirts with one hand and reaching for the shirt with the other. "Let's spread it out just the way we found it."

They draped the shirt as Meg insisted she remembered seeing it, Jud all the while staring curiously at the little girl.

"What are you holding in your skirt?" he asked when she gave him her free hand and they were ready to cross the brook.

"It's a surprise," Meg said mysteriously. "I want to surprise Dot and Twaddles. You'll never be able to guess what it is, either, Jud."

And just as she said that, her foot slipped.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NEW CAT

MEG could not fall flat, for Jud had hold of her hand, but she did drop her carefully held skirt. There was a splash, a startled "Meow!" and a shriek from Meg.

"Don't let it drown!" she cried. "Jud, catch it, quick!"

If Meg had planned to surprise the twins, she could not have managed better. They couldn't quite see what was going on, but they knew that something had happened.

"What is it?" they called. "Can we come in, Jud, can't we come see?"

Jud made a quick scoop with his hand and brought out the miserable, clawing, spitting little kitten.

"You stay where you are!" he ordered the twins. "Say, where'll I put this?" he asked helplessly, turning to Meg.

She held up her skirt again and he dropped the kitten in it, since that seemed to be the only place, and as Meg afterward said she was "a little damp" from the cat's splash and more water wouldn't hurt.

Then Jud took hold of Meg's hand more firmly and Bobby's, too, and they managed to reach the opposite bank without any more mishaps.

"What is it? What is it?" Dot and Twaddles begged, running up and down madly. "Did you find something, Meg? Did you see the buttons on the shirt? Did the man come and ask you who took it?"

"We didn't see anybody," said Bobby, who felt it was his duty to answer this flood of questions. "I don't believe the man lives very near, because we didn't see any house. But Meg found something."

By this time Aunt Polly and Linda had come down to the brook, to see what was making the twins more excited than usual.

"Meg found something!" Dot told Aunt Polly.

"Did you, dear?" asked Aunt Polly, smiling. "Don't tell me it is another shirt, Meg."

Meg stepped back and faced the group dramatically.

"It's a cat!" she said, and held her "find" up for them to see.

To her amazement, Linda and Jud went off into fits of laughter and even Aunt Polly seemed to be trying not to smile.

"I don't see anything funny," Meg announced stiffly. "It's a poor little almost dead cat. Bobby and I found it down the brook, hanging on a tree and afraid to climb off."

"Why, the poor little thing!" said Aunt Polly with ready sympathy. "We must take it home and feed it, Meg."

"I'm only laughing," Linda explained, wiping her eyes, "because it is such a distressed-looking cat, Meg. It's so dirty and so little and so—so mad!" she finished as the cat humped up its back and spit at Twaddles who tried to stroke it.

"Stray kittens don't make friends very readily," said kind Aunt Polly. "They think everyone is their enemy, till proved otherwise. We

must teach your kitten, Meg, that at Brookside Farm we like kitty cats."

"Where do you suppose it came from?" Bobby asked.

"Oh, some one had more cats than they wanted, so they turned it loose, down by the brook," said Jud. "It's a mean trick and if I ever caught a person doing it, I wouldn't waste a second giving him a piece of my mind."

Meg stared at the forlorn white kitten gravely.

"You don't suppose it belongs to the man who washed the shirt, do you?" she suggested earnestly.

Linda laughed. She was busily wrapping up the cat in tissue paper—of all things!—because she happened to have a big wad of it in her basket.

"There!" she said, handing the astonished kitten to Meg. "I can't bear to have dirty things around me—you carry her like that and as soon as we get home I'll wash her. If the cat did belong to the man whose shirt I mended, I suppose you'd feel like going back and cutting the buttons off, eh, Meg?"

Meg blushed a little.

"No-o, I wouldn't do that," she replied slowly, "but next time I wouldn't bother."

However, Jud said that he didn't think a man who had to wash his clothes in the brook and dry them on a bush had any cats.

"What are you going to call your find, Meg?" asked Jud when they were riding home at half-past four, Peter eating his sandwiches gratefully.

"Shirt," Meg answered placidly. "What are you laughing at? It's white, like the shirt we found, and if it hadn't been for the shirt we wouldn't have found the kitten at all and it might have fallen into the water and been drowned."

And in spite of some teasing and much joking, Meg continued to call the stray kitten "Shirt." True to her word, Linda washed the little creature and when its fur dried it proved to be very pretty, soft and silky. The kitty had blue eyes and by the time it was a full-grown cat, Aunt Polly was immensely proud of it.

For Shirt lived at Brookside Farm and did not go with the four little Blossoms when they

went home to Oak Hill. Aunt Polly said Poots would miss him and that cats didn't like to change their homes, anyway, and Meg knew this to be true. And every year, at Christmas time, Meg remembered to send Shirt a Christmas present and when she came to visit Aunt Polly, he always seemed to know her.

The week of rain which Aunt Polly had predicted and which had led her to hasten the picnic, arrived two or three days after the adventure in the brook. The exceedingly practical Meg remarked at the breakfast table, the first rainy morning, that she didn't care if it *did* rain—Shirt was safe in a dry place and the man had had plenty of time to get his wash dry and take it in off the bush.

"I wonder what he said when he saw the buttons," speculated Dot.

But this was one question that never received an answer, for the children never saw the man who owned the shirt and they never heard whether he was pleased to find his mending done or not.

"Maybe he thought the birds did it for him,"

said Twaddles helpfully and was delighted when Jud told him that there was a bird called the tailor bird.

"Then he did it," Twaddles declared, and when Dot pointed out that they had seen Linda doing the work, Twaddles explained that he meant the man would think the tailor bird had done it.

It was talk like this between the twins that made Jud say it gave him a headache if he listened too long.

"We haven't had a rain like this in a long time," said Aunt Polly, glancing out of the dining-room window at the dripping leaves.

"Not since we lost the raft," Bobby reminded her.

"I wonder if we'll ever find that," said Meg for the fortieth time.

"If I were you," Aunt Polly announced briskly, "I'd think up the nicest thing to do for a rainy day and have just as much fun as I could."

"Let's go out in the barn," suggested Twaddles.

"We could see what Jud is doing," Dot chimed in.

"He's mending the corn sheller," said Bobby, who usually knew what was going on at the farm.

"I think it would be fun to play lighthouse in the barn and take our lunch and stay all day," Meg declared, having thought of this while the others were talking.

None of them knew what the lighthouse game might be, but it sounded new and exciting. Aunt Polly said she didn't see why they couldn't have a picnic in the barn as well as outdoors and she promised to help Linda put up a lunch for them.

"Only remember not to bother Jud, if he is busy," she cautioned them.

The four little Blossoms knew how to run "between the drops" and as soon as their lunch was packed, they kissed Aunt Polly and started for the barn at breakneck speed. Flushed and breathless and hardly wet at all, they burst into the barn and told Jud, who was busy on the

main floor, that they were going to have another picnic.

"You do manage to have a good time, all right," he said approvingly. "Where are you going to play?"

They looked at Meg. It was her game and she was the only one who knew the best place to go.

"We have to play in the loft," directed Meg. "We're going to live in a lighthouse, Jud, and pull things up and down."

Jud did not understand at first and when she told him, he said that lighthouse keepers did not live at the top of the lighthouse and pull things up, but instead they lived in a neat little house built on the ground, like other houses, and climbed the tall stairs to take care of the light.

"Well, I think it would be more fun to live up high," said Meg, and Jud said that was the best of a "pretend" play. You could do it to suit yourself.

The four children scrambled up the loft ladder—practice had made this once difficult feat easy for them—and for a half hour jumped

about in the clean, sweet hay, forgetting their game. The smooth, slippery hay, piled in such masses, never failed to fascinate them.

"Now let's play lighthouse," suggested Meg, when Twaddles had come down rather hard on his nose and was trying not to cry. "First thing we need is a basket and rope."

They found a basket Jud said they might take and he got a piece of rope for them. Then they argued about staying down on the floor of the barn to put things in the basket for, of course, each one wanted to pull the basket up; that was the interesting part.

"Take turns," Bobby advised. "I'll stay down first, and let Meg pull up first, because she thought of this game."

So Meg ran up the ladder and Bobby put in the lunch box and she pulled and tugged and at last succeeded in pulling the basket up to the loft.

CHAPTER XVII

RAINY DAY FUN

"I'LL bury it in the hay, before Twaddles comes up," said Meg to herself. "He always wants to eat everything up right away."

She peeped over the edge of the haymow and saw the twins, one on either side of Bobby, staring up. They looked funny, for their mouths were open and Meg giggled a little.

"Send the basket back," Twaddles called. "We want to put something in it."

"All right—wait a minute," answered Meg.

She ran back and hastily stuffed the lunch box under the hay, pulling a pile over it so that it did not show at all. Then she rushed to the edge of the mow, but she was in such haste not to keep the others waiting that she dropped the basket, rope and all.

It rapped Dot on the head and she looked astonished.

"I don't see why you threw it at me," she said resentfully.

"I didn't," Meg explained. "I forgot to hold the rope. Shall I come down and get it?"

"Twaddles will bring you the rope," said Bobby. "Soon as I put something in the basket. Let's see, what shall we put in next?"

"There's Poots," Dot suggested, pointing to the cat who had followed them.

"I don't think she'll like it," objected Meg, but Bobby was eager to send the cat aloft and he and Twaddles together managed to stuff her in the basket.

Bobby held her there while Twaddles took one end of the rope in his hand and scrambled up the ladder to the waiting Meg.

"Where did you put the lunch?" he asked as soon as he reached the loft.

"I put it away," Meg assured him. "Are you going to help me pull the basket up, Twaddles?"

Twaddles was eager to help and he forgot the lunch. He stood back of Meg and they both began to pull. Poots meowed sadly as

she felt herself rising and Bobby and Dot shouted to the pullers to "hurry up."

"Poots will jump out in a minute," warned Bobby.

Twaddles' foot slipped on the soft hay and he went down, slackening his hold on the rope as he fell. Meg turned to see what had happened to him, let the rope sag, and the basket fell a foot or two with sickening speed.

This was too much for any self-respecting cat and with a wild snarl Poots leaped clear over the heads of Bobby and Dot. The angry cat landed on his feet on the barn floor ten feet away, and dashed out into the rain. Getting his fur coat soaking wet was preferable to being hoisted about in a basket, he seemed to say.

"What did you do to Poots?" called Jud. "When he went out of that door, his tail was two feet around!"

"We were only playing with him," Bobby said. "But maybe he didn't like it much."

"If you have time to play with the cat, you have time to help me," declared Jud. "Don't

you and Meg want to come and help me see if this sheller is going to work?"

Bobby and Meg loved to help Jud and they left their game cheerfully, to go to the corncrib. It was attached to the other end of the barn, so they didn't have to go out in the rain. Jud wanted to watch the machinery he had mended and he asked Meg to turn the crank and Bobby to feed in the ears of corn. They were never allowed to touch the sheller unless some older person was around, for little fingers could get easily nipped in the cog wheels. So they were rather proud to be especially asked to help Jud make it work.

"I thought the twins were coming," said Jud, absently, bending down to tighten a screw.

"They must have stayed to play with the basket," Meg replied.

And that was just what the twins were doing, playing with the basket.

"You put something in it and let me pull it up," commanded Dot.

"I haven't anything to put in it," Twaddles offered. "The cat's gone."

"Well you don't have to have a cat," said Dot impatiently. "I know what we can get—eggs!"

There were always two or three hens that persisted in stealing their nests and the twins had a fair idea of where these stolen nests were in the barn. They often found the eggs and took them in to Linda.

Now, after a few minutes' search, they found seven eggs and put them in the basket with great glee.

"Let me pull it up after you do?" asked Twaddles as Dot climbed up the ladder.

"Well—perhaps," she replied carefully. "I might want to pull it up more than once myself."

She began to pull on the rope and the basket dangled in the air. Whether the sound of voices made Dot nervous, or whether the basket was heavier than she had expected, it is hard to say. But just as Jud and Bobby and Meg came out on the barn floor, Dot let that basket fall.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Jud.

Twaddles seemed glued to one spot and the basket crashed down almost under his nose. The

eggs broke and some splashed up and sprayed him, but most of the contents ran out on the floor in a bright yellow stream.

"You took eggs!" Meg said accusingly.

"Well, nobody said not to," answered Dot in a rather frightened voice, peering over the edge of the loft.

"All right, I'll say it now," Jud proclaimed. "After this, it is against the rules to put anything in the basket which will break. Remember that. And now, let me see if I can wipe you off, Twaddles."

Jud found a cloth and mopped the egg off Twaddles—fortunately not much had reached him—and then Dot suggested that they do something else.

"We could eat," Twaddles said placidly, which made Jud laugh.

"I'm going to start feeding the stock, so perhaps it isn't too early for you to have lunch," he said. "That is one sure way to keep the twins quiet, Meg."

Dot called after him that she hadn't said anything about eating, but Jud didn't hear her. He

was already measuring out corn for the horses.

"Where is the lunch?" asked Bobby, who began to feel hungry himself.

"I know—I'll get it," Meg replied, and ran up the ladder.

She felt around in the hay where she had buried the box, but she couldn't find it. The other children came up and watched her curiously, but still she couldn't feel anything like a box.

"What are you looking for?" said Dot curiously.

"For our lunch," Meg told her, almost ready to cry. "I put it under the hay and now I can't find it."

Bobby and the twins hastily got down beside her and tossed the hay around. They looked where Meg said she put the box and they looked where she was sure it couldn't be, but all that happened was that they got very warm and tired indeed and not one sign of the lunch did they uncover.

"Do you know what I think?" said Twaddles wisely. "I think some rat found it and ate it.

I've seen rats up here in the loft, lots of times."

Meg glanced around hastily. She wasn't at all anxious to see a rat.

"Rats couldn't eat the box and everything in it," Bobby argued. "They would leave pieces of paper and things that we would see."

"Then where is the box?" demanded Dot.

Bobby sat down to think and Meg waited respectfully.

"We'll have to get a pitchfork and turn over all the hay," Bobby decided. "That's the only way to find the box: it's lost in all this hay."

He was willing to go and get the pitchfork, but he was gone several minutes. When he came back, Jud was with him.

"Pitchforks and Twaddles won't mix," declared Jud firmly. "We'll have to manage some other way. Show me where you hid the box, Meg."

Meg showed him, as nearly as she could remember. Jud knelt down and felt under the hay, while the children stared at him as though they expected him to work some kind of magic.

"I think I can find it," he announced. "You

all sit down and close your eyes tightly and don't open them till I give the word."

So they sat down on the floor and Dot put her head in Meg's lap, for it was hard for her to keep her eyes closed. She always wanted to see what was going on.

Meg counted to ninety-eight before she heard Jud cry, "All right!"

The four little Blossoms opened their eyes and there stood Jud, the lunch box in his hand. He was smiling.

"How did you find it?" asked Meg. "Was it under the hay?"

"On top," said Jud mysteriously. "You see, Meg, the box fell through the slats and landed on top of a ration of hay in one of the stalls. All I had to do was to go downstairs and get it."

Linda had packed the box so neatly and so firmly that nothing was damaged and the children had a delightful picnic up in the loft. They played there most of the afternoon, too, and often during the rainy days that followed. Indeed they amused themselves so well and were

so little trouble to Aunt Polly, that she promised them one more outdoor picnic, the first dry sunny day that came.

"Be sure you save me some sandwiches," said Peter, when he heard about it.

They promised and it was Dot who woke up the household bright and early when she saw the sun streaming in at the window.

"We can have the picnic!" she shouted joyfully. "Aunt Polly, isn't it dry and sunny? Get up, Twaddles, we can have the picnic."

It was a sunny day, but it wasn't so dry, for the ground was still damp from so much rain.

"But if we go wading, the water's wet," argued Dot, and Linda, too, thought they might as well go.

"Don't forget my sandwiches," Peter reminded them as he saw them start.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF THE VACATION

THE four little Blossoms wanted to go to the same place where they had gone before and Jud drove them. Then he was to take the horses and wagon back for his father to use during the day and Peter would come for the picnickers in the afternoon and get his sandwiches.

"Don't go wading till Jud comes," said Aunt Polly, when good-natured Jud had gone back. "Help Linda spread out the rubber blanket, for we want to be comfortable while you play around."

The children spread out the blanket and on top of that Aunt Polly spread a cotton one and then she and Linda sat down to sew.

"Let's go see if there is another shirt spread

out to dry," suggested Meg, and she was much excited when they saw a bit of white fluttering from a bush.

"'Tisn't the same place," Dot argued.

"Well, it's almost the same place," retorted Bobby. "Only it looks ragged," he added.

Meg was eager to go and examine the white thing, but she knew they would have to wait for Jud. Aunt Polly laughed when she heard about it and said that Meg would have Linda running a mending shop if she was not very careful.

"After we have lunch, if Jud is willing to take you, you may go over and see what it is," she told her little niece kindly. "You'd have every one nicely washed and mended if you could, wouldn't you, Meg?"

Jud came back on foot and after he had rested a minute, declared he was willing to wade the brook with the children. But Aunt Polly insisted they must have lunch first and of course no one wanted to miss that. As soon as the last crumb was gone, however, the children began to tease and Jud said they might as well go. He

had laughed at the idea of another shirt, but half way across the stream he seemed to change his mind.

"Guess somebody lost his shirt," observed Jud, keeping a firm grip on Dot, who seemed to be trying to dance.

"Say, wouldn't it be funny," began Bobby, but Meg had the same idea at the same time.

"Do you suppose it could——" she said slowly.

"It's the raft!" yelled Twaddles, breaking away from Jud, and rushing into the bushes. "It's our raft—Oh, Jud!" Twaddles had stepped on a sharp stone.

"I wish you'd be a little more careful," said Jud calmly. "Well, it is the raft! Can you beat that?"

Tangled in broken reeds and a few prickly bushes, lay their raft, Geraldine smiling as sweetly as ever and still propped up against Meg's book. Nothing was missing, not even Twaddles' singing bird or Bobby's airplane.

"I'm so glad!" Meg kept saying. "I'm so

glad! Now let's go home and play with them."

"It's lucky we've had this long, dry spell," said Jud, picking up Geraldine and eyeing her critically. "If we'd had one good storm, good-by toys!"

Dot tucked Geraldine under her arm, Twaddles stuffed his bird into his pocket, Meg took her book and Bobby his airplane, and Jud offered to tow the raft. So slowly and carefully they made their way back to where Jud had left his socks and shoes.

Aunt Polly and Linda were surprised and delighted when they saw the children coming, for they had begun to wonder what they could be doing.

"You don't mean to tell me you found the raft!" exclaimed Aunt Polly, when she heard the news. "Why, that's the best luck I ever heard of."

And Linda said "My goodness!" over and over, and wanted to know just where they had found it and who saw it first and how they had managed to reach it.

"You've played enough in the water," said

Aunt Polly, when each child had told the story. "Put on your shoes and stockings and see if you can't find me a maidenhair fern for my fern-box."

Meg found it first, and then Jud lent her his jack-knife and showed her how to take it up so that the roots would not be injured. Then he left her for a minute while he went back to get a paper cup from Linda to plant it in, and when he came back he found her backed up against a tree and looking frightened.

"What scared you?" he asked quickly. "Did you see a snake, Meg?"

"No," she whispered. "I don't know what it was. But it stared and stared at me, Jud."

"Well, where did you see it?" demanded Jud briskly. "Let me have a whack at it with this branch. Where'd you see it, Meg?"

"In the hole in this tree," answered Meg. "I was shaking more dirt off the fern when I looked up and there it was jiggling at me."

"Where?" asked Jud again, a bit impatiently. "I don't see any hole."

"I'm standing over it," said Meg, "so the thing can't get away."

Meg, you see, was frightened, but not too frightened to be interested and curious about a strange animal.

"I'm sure it's an animal, 'cause it moves," she told Jud, as she stood aside to let him look in the hole.

Jud put his hand in the hole—it was an old dead tree and hollow at the top—and drew out something soft and fluffy.

"Just as I thought," he chuckled. "It's a baby owl."

"Oh, how cunning," cried Meg, coming closer and venturing to put a finger on the bunch of feathers. "But what a funny face, Jud!"

Indeed the baby owl looked like a very young and foolish monkey as it sat in Jud's hands and rolled its head and stared aimlessly.

"He's pretty near blind," Jud explained. "In the daytime owls can hardly see at all. I suspect there's a nest in this old tree. Want to hold it for me while I feel?"

Meg was certainly not afraid of a baby owl,

and she took it tenderly. Sure enough, Jud knew what he was talking about—he put his arm away into the tree trunk and brought out two more little owls.

Twaddles and Dot had come up by this time, and they were perfectly entranced with the queer little birds.

Jud carefully put the baby owls back. Then they planted the fern in the paper cup, found Bobby, who was trying to fish with a bread-crumb tied to a string, and told him about the owls, and then they heard the wagon coming for them.

"Have a good time?" asked Peter, as he helped them all in and the wagon started its noisy trip home. Peter was eating one of the sandwiches they had saved for him and looked very contented.

"Such a nice time," said the four little Blossoms.

"Was there any mail?" asked Aunt Polly.

"Just one letter," replied Peter.

But that was a very important letter, as the Blossoms found out when they were once more

at home and Aunt Polly read it to them while Linda was getting supper.

"Mother's coming!" cried Bobby, meeting Jud on his way to the barn.

"That's fine," said Jud heartily. Then his face fell.

"But you don't want to go home yet!" he urged. "Vacation isn't over so soon, is it? There's lots we planned to do we haven't done."

"Mother's going to stay a week," said Bobby happily. "School doesn't open for two weeks, but we have to go home and get ready. Say, Jud, I didn't miss Mother—not such a lot, that is—but now I miss her dreadful much."

When Mother Blossom came she found all the children in the car with Aunt Polly to meet her. And the things they did during that one week, from another picnic to having all the new friends they had made at Brookside come to supper, including Mr. Sparks—well, Linda said there was more going on than there had been all through the summer, and Linda ought to have known!

"I s'pect Aunt Polly will miss us," said Twad-

dles the last morning of their visit, as Mother Blossom was buttoning Dot into a clean frock and Aunt Polly was on her knees locking the trunks.

"I s'pect I shall," said Aunt Polly, tears in her kind eyes.

This was too much for Twaddles.

"You come and stay at our house," he told her earnestly. "And you can come and visit school."

For the twins still insisted they were going to school.

Aunt Polly promised that she would come to see them some time during the winter and that she wouldn't cry any more but just remember the nice times they had had together that summer.

"And if you go to school, you'll learn to write, and then I shall look for letters," she said seriously.

So the four little Blossoms started home for Oak Hill and found a Daddy Blossom there very glad to see them, as well as Norah and Sam and Philip, who, as Meg observed, had "grown considerable." He wasn't lame any more, either.

And if you want to read about what Meg and Bobby did in school, and how the twins contrived to go to school, too, in spite of the fact that they were only four years old, you must read the next book about them which is called "Four Little Blossoms at Oak Hill School."

"Oh, but it's been a perfectly lovely summer, hasn't it?" said Meg, while she was helping unpack her things.

"Best ever," declared Bobby.

"And just think—we own a cow!" cried Dot.

"And maybe—when she gets big—we can milk her," added Twaddles. "Oh, I like the country—I do."

"Let's all buy a farm when we grow up," suggested Bobby.

"Let's!" all the others cried in chorus.

THE END

Vicki